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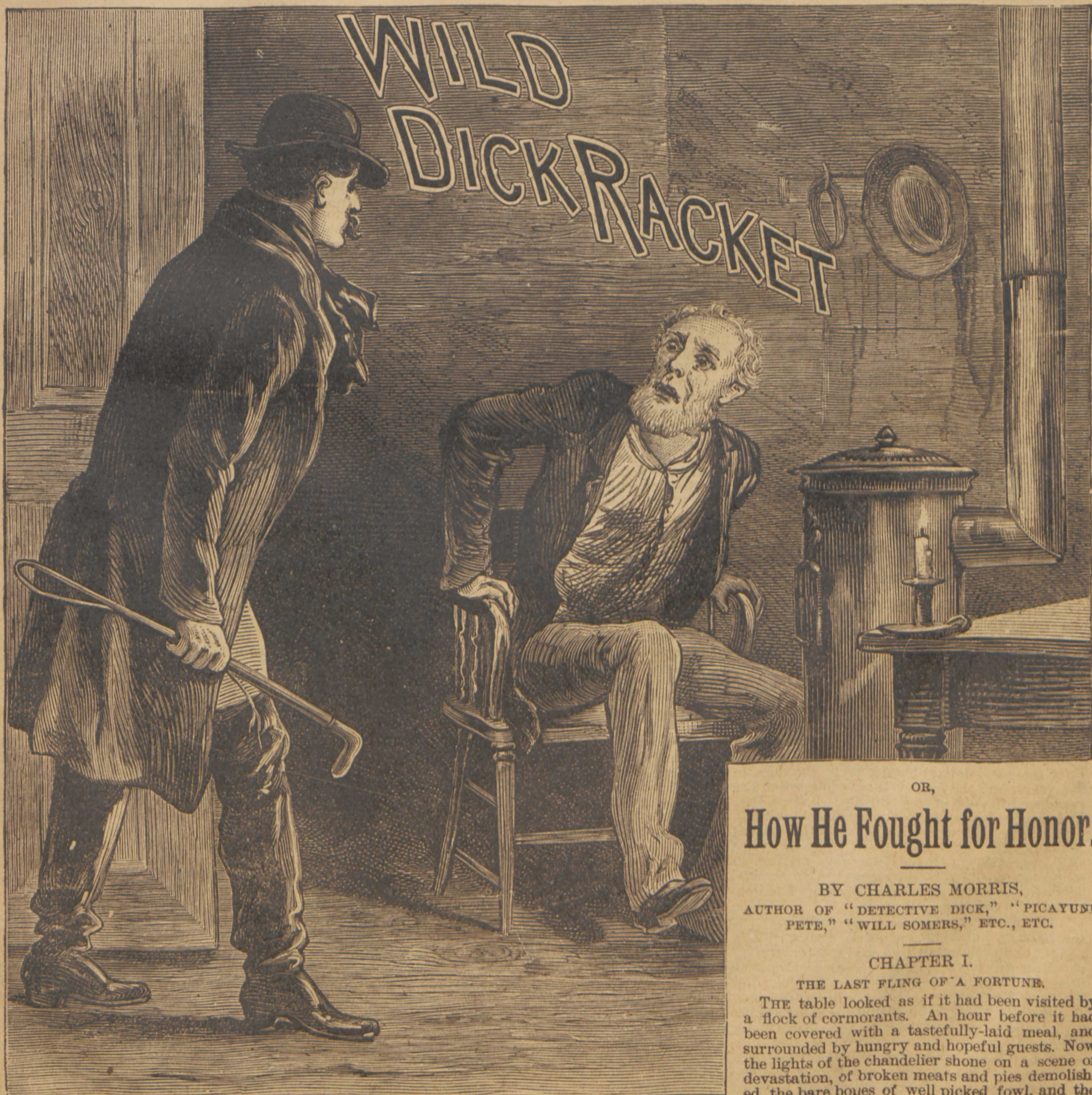
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"MR. RICHARD!" HE CRIED, IN TERROR. "MR. RICHARD! YOU HERE?"

OR,

How He Fought for Honor.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,
AUTHOR OF "DETECTIVE DICK," "PICAYUNE
PETE," "WILL SOMERS," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE LAST FLING OF A FORTUNE.

THE table looked as if it had been visited by a flock of cormorants. An hour before it had been covered with a tastefully-laid meal, and surrounded by hungry and hopeful guests. Now the lights of the chandelier shone on a scene of devastation, of broken meats and pies demolished, the bare bones of well picked fowl, and the slim relics of puddings and pastry. Empty wine-

bottles, and glasses with heel-taps, showed that the guests had done full duty to the juice of the grape. Altogether the scene presented that unpleasant disorder which makes the end of a feast so sharp a contrast to its beginning.

The guests were partly leaning back in their chairs, with an air of satisfaction, partly strolling about the room.

At the head of the table sat a young man, fashionably dressed and very handsome in countenance, yet with marks of dissipation on his classically-cut features, and a reckless wildness in his clear gray eyes.

He rose from his chair, pushing it back with a careless send.

"Come, gentlemen," he said, "suppose we adjourn to the next room. I have a box of prime Havanas for you to sample, and a little private chat for you to hear. There's a joke on the carpet, lads, that you may not altogether relish. But the world will turn round, you know, and we've all got to turn with it."

There was something in his voice and in the laugh with which he ended these remarks, that made his guests look at him and at each other in surprise.

They rose and followed him, however, to the smoking-room. The party was not altogether a reputable-looking one. They had the air of wild livers, dissipated young men, who had been burning the candle of life at both ends. Some of them were well-dressed, gentlemanly persons, but others had the aspect of spongers, and a judge of human nature would have guessed that they were the fit associates of a fast young man recklessly engaged in sowing his wild oats.

A few minutes sufficed to supply them with cigars, and soon the air was blue with smoke. They were seated carelessly around the smoking-table, their host at its head.

He puffed awhile in silence, while they waited curiously for him to begin. Then he took the cigar from his lips and sent a ring of smoke in a whirl toward the ceiling.

"So it goes," he said lightly. "All in smoke. Watch it fade out, gentlemen. That's the emblem of Dick Racket's life and fortune."

"What confounded nonsense are you at now, Dick?" exclaimed one of his guests, in an angry tone. "Getting up some conundrum for us to answer?"

"As you please, Joe. We are at the end of the game, boys, that's the whole story. You have helped me nobly to play the fool. We have had five years of a fast life together, with Scapegrace Dick for leader and banker. And a lovely reputation we've made in the country around. I know folks think that I'm fit for the State's Prison and you for the gallows. But it's a long lane that has no turning. We've come to the end of the rope. There goes my old life. Here comes my new!"

He sent two whiffs of smoke in quick succession from his lips, and watched them as they slowly twirled upward.

His guests looked at one another with dismayed faces. Evidently they did not like the shape of this "joke." One of them answered, with a forced laugh:

"You promised us a joke, Dick. It's a sweet one you're giving us. Come, drop all that nonsense. What's on hand for the night? I'm just in the humor to wake up some of the sleeping good souls around here with a rouser."

"You are, eh? You will have to do it on your own hook then. Listen to the prodigal's confession, boys: Five years ago I began life as a well-feathered gosling, with an empty head and a full pocket. To-day I end that life as a well-grown goose, with a full head and an empty pocket. Fifty thousand dollars have gone to the dogs in five years, and the feast you have just eaten has swallowed the last of my ducats. I hope that little confession won't spoil your digestion."

The cigars did not seem to agree with several of the guests. They took them from their lips with wry faces. Dick's joke was getting to sound too much like solid earnest. He smoked away for a minute in silence, his eyes fixed satirically on his dismayed guests.

"The game is at an end, my jolly boys, for the bank is bursted," he began again. "I've bought experience, but I've paid my fortune for it. You will have to hunt up some other rich young fool, with more money than brains. For my part, I am going to cut loose, turn tramp, or road-agent. Think I'll raffle off my good clothes for a tramp's rig, and take to the sidewalk for a living."

"Why, hang your picture, Dick!" cried a young man of gentlemanly aspect, "if you are in earnest, do you suppose we are all a set of dirty spongers, to drop you after we've squeezed you dry? I, for one, am not that sort. But this

is all blamed stuff. You haven't flirted away all your cash."

"Every blessed penny. Got to beg my next loaf of bread, for my last nickel is gone."

"Then where's the jewelry you were loaded with? Where's that diamond ring I saw on your finger yesterday? That's worth a clear thousand if it's worth a cent."

Dick's face changed. He glanced hastily down at his finger. There was a slight hesitation in his voice as he answered curtly:

"It's gone, and that's enough. Would you like to split that diamond, too? I've got rid of it—no matter how. If you want it you can whistle for it."

"I don't care a fig what has become of it," was the reply. "It's no affair of mine. But you don't know this chicken, Dick Racket, if you fancy I'm the man to taste your salt, and then go back on you because you've flung your cash to the winds. Give me your hand, old friend. I'm your backbone through thick and thin."

There was a look of surprise and pleasure in Dick's eyes as he grasped the proffered hand.

"I have nothing left to give you, Will West, but thanks," he muttered.

"To the deuce with your giving! I put no price on my friendship."

The two young men stood with clasped hands, looking at the rest of the party, none of whom seemed ready to back Will in his offer of friendship. Dick looked at them satirically, and then burst into a laugh.

"You look blue in the gills, gentlemen. Come, I am not through with you yet. There's not a man of you who has not well lined his pocket with my cash. Now I'll tell you what: I'm off for the West to-morrow on a little trip of speculation. But I want a stake to begin on. I have been your banker so long, it is time to turn the tables. There is my hat. Come up, lads, with your contributions."

He dashed his hat on the table, and lay back in his chair, looking down the length of the table with an odd expression. There was a disdainful curl on his lip as he observed that none of his guests moved. They looked like so many foxes caught in a trap. Will West was the only one that thrust his hand into his pocket.

But, at this instant, the door of the room suddenly opened, and a person entered in a hasty manner. This was an oldish man, dressed with the plainness of a servant, and with marks of great agitation in his face. His clothes were spattered with mud, as if he had just come from a long and hard ride. He paused abruptly on entering, and gazed at the company with a look of doubt and displeasure. It was but for an instant, however, and then he hastened again toward the youthful host.

The latter hurried toward him.

"What brings you, Jerry?" he eagerly asked. "You have ridden hard. What is wrong? Has anything happened?"

"Yes. Something dreadful! Come here, Mr. Richard; I have tidings for your ear alone."

He led the young man, whose face had grown deeply disturbed and anxious, hastily aside to a corner of the room. Here an earnest conversation, in a low tone, ensued. The remainder of the company listened curiously, eager to learn the cause of this mysterious visit. Yet the conference was too low for their ears. Only a few sentences were audible.

"A terrible affair.—The police are all at fault.—Doctor says there is no hope.—Very mysterious."

Such were some of the broken phrases that met the ears of the listeners, and that excited their curiosity to the utmost.

"He is there, then?" asked Dick, with a lowering countenance.

"Yes. You must make haste. There is not a minute to lose. You know that your uncle is completely under his influence."

The young spendthrift rested his head upon his hand for a moment, while an unusually thoughtful look came over his intelligent face. He then sprang up, with an odd expression of countenance, and walked forward among his guests.

"An important affair calls me away, gentlemen," he announced. "What it is does not matter. But I may need money more than ever. I have spent my cash freely on you. It is your turn now to fork over. There lies my hat. Come show that you've got souls."

The most of Dick's wild associates drew back at this unwelcome proposal, with muttered excuses. Several of them, however, came forward. Will West, with a hasty movement, flung his purse into the hat.

"There is my contribution," he declared.

"And if there is a man here who refuses to back it, he's a sponging snipe that ought to be kicked out of the house."

His eyes roamed angrily over the party as he spoke. One of them, a fellow with a lowering face, seemed to think that Will's remark was addressed specially to him, for he bustled up in a rage.

"Do you mean me, Will West?" he demanded. "If you do, by all that's good, I'll cure you of your meddling!"

"Come on, if you think it is in your boots," answered Will, boldly. "I'm just in the humor now. If you take up the glove, I'm your man!"

The fellow aimed a vicious blow at Will, which he avoided with a quick movement, and returned with interest. For the moment it looked as if the feast might break up in a row.

Dick sprang hastily forward, and forced himself between the combatants.

"Come, there is enough of this!" he cried. "I'm boss of this shanty. If there's anybody spoiling for a fight he can have it out with Dick Racket."

It was evident that it would be no walk-over. The young man while of a graceful figure, was strongly put together, and his swelling shoulders showed signs of powerful muscles. The quarrelsome party drew back. A scornful smile marked Dick's handsome face.

"By Jove! I'd like nothing better than a mill! I'm just in the humor for it, for I'm down on bloodsuckers, from the shoulder. Take back your money, Will. I don't want it. I was only trying a little traverse on these gentlemen. Come, Jerry, my old friend."

"Are these your associates, Mr. Richard?" asked the old servant, indignantly. "If your father were alive, and could see—"

"A trace to all that, Jerry," answered the reckless youth. "That fun's all over. The old Wild Dick has kicked the bucket. It's a new man you see before you."

"You are wasting precious time."

"That's a true word. But what's to be done? There's no railroad train within three hours, and I have no horse."

"Take mine. He is a little blown; but he is good for the return."

"By Jove, then, he shall do it, or drop in the effort! Are the roads heavy?"

"Yes. And a sharp rain is falling."

"There is no time now to stop for mud or rain. It's neck or nothing now between me and my sweet cousin. See that the beast is ready. I will take the road within five minutes."

He broke from the room by one door, and Jerry by another. Within the time mentioned he was back again, booted and spurred for the journey. A heavy dreadnought enveloped his form. In a minute afterward Jerry also returned.

"The horse is ready, Mr. Richard," he announced.

"Then wish me good luck. It's no child's play I have before me. But through thick or thin is Dick Racket's motto."

CHAPTER II.

A WILD NIGHT ABROAD.

It was a miserable night for man or horse to be out in. Dark as pitch, the roads heavy with mud, fine rain falling, a damp, chill air soughing through the tree-tops. One could not but pity the wayfarer whom ill-fortune sent abroad on such a night.

Yet there was at least one traveler out in the miserable scene. A horseman rode wildly and recklessly onward, heedless of the falling rain, or of the mud that splashed from under the iron hoofs of his steed. Like a shadow he came and went, shooting for a moment through the line of light from roadside cottages, and away again like the ghost of a wayfarer into the thick darkness.

With set lips and fixed eyes the rider kept straight onward, as steadily as if through the full daylight. Either he or his horse knew every step of the road by night or day.

Half a mile after mile lay behind him. The horse slackened his speed and breathed heavily. He had evidently been worked beyond his powers. The rider patted his neck.

"Keep up, old chap. Seven miles more, and you can stagger into your stable, and rest like a king. Don't give out now. There's too much on your heels."

The weary animal mended his pace again for a short time. But it was evident that the poor creature was fagged out. Another mile and he drew up almost to a walk, from which neither whip nor spur could rouse him.

"Hang the luck!" cried the rider, angrily. "I would walk the balance, but it would throw

me an hour late, and ten minutes now might be my ruin. What's that light ahead? It's the Blue Bell, for a wager! Good! I can strike a relay there, if I've an ounce of luck."

Two minutes after he drew up in front of a roadside inn, from whose open front a clear light streamed across the road.

"Hey, the house!" he yelled loudly. "Merry alive, there, my good souls. Waiter, landlord, hostler—stir your stumps, you rascals!"

This loud and energetic call brought two or three persons quickly to the porch.

"Ride up here and dismount," said one, who was evidently the landlord. "We'll see to your horse. It's a wild night, and you must want a drying-up."

"No. I must on. But my horse is fagged out, and I want a relay. Quick! I haven't a minute to lose."

"Sorry, sir; but it can't be done. There is not a horse in the stable, and won't be any in for an hour. Better dismount and warm up."

"Dismount the deuce! I'll go on if I have to crawl. There's no play when I'm on business, old Boniface, and you ought to know that!"

"Hillo, it's Mr. Racket!" cried the landlord, in surprise. "Didn't make you out in the dark, sir. You've heard the dreadful news? About your old uncle?"

"Yes, yes, impatiently."

"How he was flung into the quarry, and picked up with hardly an ounce of life left?"

"Yes, yes, I know it all," was the short answer. "There's where I'm bound. Trot out anything. A mule. A cow. I must go on."

"I'm sorry, but there's not a creature left in the stables. Every animal went over to the Bromly fair this afternoon."

The impatient rider flung himself from the horse and mounted the steps at a bound.

"Give me something hot, landlord. I'm chilled through to the marrow. And give that horse a pint of your strongest whisky! He must go on, if he drops dead at the end. Pour it in a bucket of water, and he will take it. Quick! No time for head-scratching now!"

These energetic orders had their effect in stirring the people of the hotel to action. They knew Dick Racket's temper too well to dally when he said *go!* The draught of whisky and water ordered for the horse was ready in a minute. The animal hesitated at the strange taste of the beverage. But the poor creature was too thirsty to be particular, and after a moment began eagerly to swallow the well-primed mixture.

"Good for him! He takes to his whisky like an old toper. That dose ought to put another five miles run into his muscles," declared Dick.

"You are wet to the skin, Mr. Racket," rejoined the landlord. "Better take a warming."

"Where's the warmer I ordered? That's all I'll take this night."

"Here it is."

He handed the young man a brimming glass of hot whisky. In an instant it was tossed off.

"That's a heavy dose, Boniface, but I've got the rain in my bones, and must drive it out with something. And now good-by."

He thrust a coin into the open palm of the landlord, and strode out to the horse-block. The weary animal already felt the effect of his potation. His drooping head was lifted, and he scraped the soaked ground with his forefoot.

"Jolly lad! You've got the fire in your veins. Runs warmer than blood while it lasts, but it's a vengeance when it gives out. Do your prettiest now, my beauty."

He patted the horse's neck, sprung lightly to the saddle, and gathered the reins. In a moment the animal was away, as nimbly as if he was fresh from the stable. The splashing sound of hoofs in the soft mud, the sinking of a shadow into the darkness, and all was gone.

The host of the Blue Bell stood striving to pierce the darkness with his sight.

"A wild blade that," he muttered, shaking his head. "The wildest in the country. Hardly an ounce of deviltry played here in the last five years but Dick Racket has been at the bottom of it. But he's a whole-souled fellow, and I like him. It's said he's clean run through the fortune that his old father left him. The rascally young scapegrace! if he has beggared himself he ought to starve awhile to bring him to his senses. But, after all, I like Scapegrace Dick, and I'll hang to him if the whole county disown him for a reprobate."

Five miles beyond the Blue Bell a long stone wall bordered the roadside. Within it a grove of trees lifted their leafy heads into the darkness, half concealing an old-fashioned mansion that stood somewhat back from the road. But

the whole broad front was now bathed in gloom, and the house would have seemed deserted but for a light that shone from a side-window, and flung a clear ray out over the water-soaked trees. The night was not old, but deep silence everywhere reigned. It seemed as if the mansion had gone to sleep but for the single eye with which it looked out into the gloomy night.

A splashing sound, as of slow-moving hoofs, came from the road south of the wall. It was the solitary wayfarer, thus far advanced on his stormy quest.

"You've lost all you're spirit, old brute," cried Dick, "but I'll swear by corn-juice after this, for a played-out horse. Keep it up a brace of minutes more! Hey! you rascal! That's a jade's trick!"

The horse had stumbled and fallen. Only an agile spring from the saddle saved the rider from being flung headlong into the soft mud.

"Lie there and rest, old royal. You've done your work nobly, and that's a soft bed for your worn-out body. I'm on the spot, thank the stars! Here's the corner of the park wall. It's now to get into the house, and if they keep their old watch that's no child's play."

He followed the wall until he reached the gate, a strong iron open-work safeguard to the park that lay beyond. It was firmly locked. He shook it impatiently, but it failed to yield to his hand, and there seemed to be no person within hearing. All remained silent beyond.

"Hang them for a sleepy-headed crew!" he angrily cried. "But there's no time to lose at the gate, while my worthy rascal of a cousin may be working his dirty schemes inside. This may be part of his game. They are not used to keeping so tight a lock on their park gate."

Dick looked along the wall. It was eight feet high, and slippery with the rain that still continued to fall. The openwork of the gate offered better footing, and his nimble fingers and feet soon enabled him to overcome the obstacle to his entrance. Like a squirrel he clambered to the top of the iron-work, and from that gained the summit of the wall. A nimble jump now brought him to the grassy surface of the park within.

"So far, good. Now for the house."

It loomed darkly before him, seeming to forbid an entrance to its gloomy precincts. He strode boldly forward. The door, a strong oaken portal, was firmly locked. In vain he rung and knocked. No one answered.

"By the beard of St. Mark! it's a conspiracy to keep me out," he declared. "I dare not make too much noise, with my uncle lying half dead, or I'd teach them that Dick Racket is no baby to be played with in this fashion. But if Phil Morton fancies that he can keep me out by any such transparent joke, he's got the wrong coon to deal with. Into that house I go, by hook or crook."

He made the circle of the mansion, trying every door and window. They were all firmly fastened.

Dick considered a minute, and then made his way to an outhouse, which stood some distance apart from the main building.

The door of this readily opened to his hand. He strode into a room which lay before him. The faint light of a candle illuminated the place, and displayed the figure of an old man, who sat crooning over a stove in its midst. This person looked with eager inquiry at the visitor, and then sprung up with a cry of alarm.

"Mr. Richard!" he cried, in terror. "Mr. Richard! You here?"

"No one else, Tony. I am not a ghost, that you need lose your senses at sight of me. What ails the blazing fools at the house, that there's no admittance?"

"Fly, sir! fly! You are in dreadful danger! Fly at once! You don't know—"

"And won't soon, if I trust to you. Hold your jaw, you old fool, if you have nothing better to say. How am I to get into the house—that's the question."

"Fly, sir! Oh, do not stay here! They are searching for you already."

"What in the blazes ails you, you old idiot?" Dick shook him fiercely. "Come back to your senses, if you can. Is my uncle dead?"

"No, no! He is almost! But they say he cannot live. He was flung over into the old quarry. And they say—they say—"

"They say what?"

"That it was *you* who flung him over! That you are his murderer! You! My dear young master! It is not true! I know it is a lie! But, they are after you! The police are on your track! Oh, sir, fly for your life while there is a hope! They will hang you for the murder!"

Dick stood looking at the old man with open eyes and mouth.

"By the blessed piper, if this don't beat Bannager! So, Phil Morton, this is another bit of your handiwork? Hang me if I'm a baby, though! Smart as you are, I bet high I come up with you. Where is there a ladder, Tony? Into that house I must go."

"Into the house? Where they all are, police and all? Oh, sir! for the love of Heaven—"

"Dry up, old man! I am not a baby or a fool. We are wasting minutes here in prattle. If all the police in New York were there, in I would go. My uncle shall not die under Phil Morton's blistering tongue if he calls me twenty times a murderer!"

"But, Mr. Richard—"

"A ladder, I say! A ladder!"

The old man, trembling with terror, led the way from the room. He dare no longer trifle with the determined man before him.

In a few moments he pointed out a ladder, which lay at the foot of a wall, half buried in grass. The muscular young man picked it up as if it had been a feather.

"That will do, Tony. Get back to your den again. Let me alone to deal with them. And, don't you fear for Dick Racket, the Scapegrace. He's a match for his sweet cousin."

He carried the heavy burden through the rain to the foot of the house wall.

Meanwhile, within the house, a striking scene was enacting. In the room from whose window came the gleam of light, stood several persons, gathered near a bed, on which lay stretched the form of an old man, with white hair and beard, and his countenance of a deadly pallor. His eyes were closed, and he seemed to breathe with great difficulty.

Of the persons present one was a tall, slender, neatly-dressed young man, with a slim, colorless face, and thin, white lips. There was something sinister in the look of his gray eyes, and in the settled lines that hung about his mouth. Yet there was a look of deep concern and sorrow on his face, as if he keenly felt the state of the old man.

There were three other persons. One of them was evidently the doctor. He held the wrist of the invalid, and consulted his watch as he felt for the flagging pulse. The remaining two seemed officials, from their dress and general appearance.

"What have you to say, doctor?" asked the young man, anxiously. "My poor old uncle! Can you give me any hope?"

"I fear not, Mr. Morton. Try and compose yourself, sir. I dread the result."

The young man turned away and drew his hand across his eyes.

"I cannot bear to think of it. Such a noble man as he was. And such a benefactor to me! To be done to death by the hand of a murderer! And my own cousin, his own nephew. To think of it! But the tie of relationship shall not stand in my way, when justice calls for a victim. Murder must be avenged!"

"His haunts are known, Mr. Morton. Orders are already issued. He will be our prisoner before morning," answered one of the officials. "The finding of that wig was a wonderful chance. It settles the question of murder beyond a doubt. Richard Racket is the man. I'll swear to that!"

"And I'll swear you lie like a thief!"

This deep, indignant voice drew all eyes to the door of the room. There stood the man in question, splashed with mud from head to foot, dripping with rain, his cap drawn down low over his forehead, but his keen eyes flashing out like two stars on the surprised group.

CHAPTER III.

A BROKEN REVELATION.

THERE was an interesting tableau in the room of the hurt invalid. In the doorway stood Dick, soaked with rain, mud-splashed, but looking six inches taller in the indignation that burnt in his eyes, and curled his scornful lips.

Opposite stood his scheming cousin, the very picture of dismay and consternation.

The doctor had dropped the pulse of his patient, and stood beside the officers, full of surprise at the interruption.

"So this is your game, eh, my sweet cousin?" cried Dick again, with sneering indignation. "You're working your schemes to lay this job on me? Want to keep me from my uncle's ear, do you, you foul-mouthed reprobate? Got the police after me? Well, here I am, and I don't care a fig for the police!"

"Richard Racket! is it indeed you?" exclaimed the cousin, holding up his hands with

show of horror. "That you should venture here, to the bedside of your victim! I am overwhelmed—"

"I've no doubt you are!" answered Dick, with a sneer. "I calculated you would be when you saw my phiz. I'm here for a last word with my uncle. And I'll have it, if there were a regiment of Phil Mortons to fence me out."

At this point the old doctor stepped forward, holding up his hands impressively.

"Cease this unseemly squabble over the bed of a dying man!" he commanded. "As for you, sir, if this is your uncle, you will have no word with him, for he has not spoken since his fall, and I fear will never speak again."

This was unlooked-for and unwelcome information to Dick. His lip fell, and a baffled look came into his eyes.

"And, secondly," remarked one of the officers, stepping forward, "if you are Richard Racket—"

"That is the name I swear by. I don't calculate to soon go back on it."

"Then you are my prisoner. I take you in custody for the attempted murder of Amos Wilmot. It will be a real murder if the man before you dies."

Dick stood motionless as the officers ranged themselves beside him, and one of them laid a hand on his shoulder. He hardly seemed to hear their words. His eyes were fixed on the countenance of the invalid.

"Uncle! Uncle Amos!" called Dick, in a loud tone. "You are not going to die without giving me redress? You have wronged me—wronged me bitterly! You are not going to carry the secret to your grave? Come back to life—if only to do justice to your brother's son!"

This loud, wild appeal had an astonishing effect. The voice seemed to reach the ears of the invalid, who had lain stretched like a dead man. A sudden stir—a flush of color in the pallid cheeks—a gleam of light in the lusterless eyes. In an instant the impulsive young man had flung off the heavy hands of the officers as if they were but dead leaves on his shoulders, and rushed forward to the bedside, where he eagerly grasped the invalid's hand.

"Uncle!" he cried again. "It is your nephew calls! Come back to life! Do me justice! You have hated me without cause! I have been belied to your ears. Tell me, oh! tell me the mysterious secret of the—"

He paused suddenly as his uncle gave another stir, and spoke in a voice as faint as if from the depths of the grave:

"Who calls? What voice is that? I have heard it before."

There was a movement of astonishment in the room. The dead had been called back to life. Phil Morton sprung hastily to the officers, hiding his look of dismay under a show of indignation.

"Will you permit this?" he demanded, loudly. "It is the murderer disturbing the dying moments of his victim! Arrest him, I command you! Put an end to this shameful scene!"

"Keep cool, my dear sir," answered the principal officer. "There is no harm being done."

"It is I, your nephew, Richard Racket!" rejoined Dick, to the faint appeal.

"My nephew! Richard! The outcast! The spendthrift!"

"I have been a fool, but I have repented. You drove me to it, uncle. Forgive me for saying it now, but the truth must not be concealed. It is for you to redeem your wrong and make a man of me!"

Phil Morton dashed forward from the immovable officers.

"This is shameful!" he exclaimed—"this hounding of the dying! If no one has any sense of shame, I will take it in my own hands to protect my dying uncle from outrage!"

He caught Dick by the shoulders, and drew him back by a vigorous jerk.

The young man turned on his assailant, with the glare of a baffled lion in his eyes.

"You, Phil Morton!" he hissed. "Your lying tongue has kept me from him these six years. But your game is done. Lift your hands from my shoulders!"

"I will not!"

"Richard! my nephew Richard!" faintly called the invalid. "I feel—I know it now. I have wronged you. Here! Let me with my last breath redeem—"

Dick strove to rush forward, but the clinging hands of his cousin held him back. What followed passed like the work of magic. A quick turn. A movement of the hand. Phil Morton was hurled like a chip against the opposite wall, and fell in a heap to the floor, while the impul-

sive spendthrift sprung forward again to the bedside of his uncle.

"Here I am, uncle! Speak—speak!" he demanded. "I have forgiven all, and beg to be forgiven for all."

"Bend your ear, Richard." The voice was as faint as the last whisper of the evening breeze.

Dick bent his ear to the quivering lips.

"It is hidden," came in a low whisper, hardly to be distinguished. "Look in—in the—brown back— Shake—"

The voice died away in inarticulate murmurs.

"Yes, yes," cried Dick. "Go on! go on!"

"In the— Richard—"

A look of anguish came upon the face of the invalid. He appeared to vainly strive for words. With a paroxysm of failing strength, he half-lifted himself in the bed, and then fell back, limp and lifeless, his face whiter than the pillow on which it lay.

"He is in the swoon again," declared the doctor.

"It is too late!" exclaimed Dick, rising disconsolately to his feet. "I have gained only a few wandering words, that mean nothing. Poor uncle! He tried to do me justice at the last. It is too late. I am left to beggary in earnest!"

He stood moodily, with clasped arms, gazing down on the pallid face before him in baffled sorrow. The officers looked at the troubled face of the young man with a feeling of doubt. This was not the look of a murderer gloating over his victim.

At this moment Phil Morton rose from the floor, where he had fallen like a log from Dick's fierce thrust. His voice trembled with fiery passion as he called out to the officers:

"Arrest him! Arrest the murderer! I command you, in the name of the law, to do your duty!"

At this demand, the principal officer stepped up to Dick.

"I can't quite see through this business, my friend," he remarked. "You don't act like a guilty man, yet the evidence looks black against you. Shall I ask you a few questions?"

"Not here," rejoined Dick. "Come into the next room, lest we disturb the poor invalid. There is some confounded blunder afloat, my friend. Or maybe some rascally trick."

He led the way to the adjoining room, followed by all but the doctor, who remained in the room with his patient.

"Now," said Dick, drawing his form proudly up, "I am ready to listen."

"You are in the habit of wearing a valuable diamond ring?" asked the officer.

"Yes," admitted Dick, though a look of doubt passed over his face.

"Where is it?"

"I haven't got it with me."

"What have you done with it?"

The young man seemed disturbed by the question. Despite himself, he could not prevent an uneasy movement. He looked around him. There stood his cousin with an expression of insolent triumph on his face. This recalled Dick to a sense of the situation. He drew himself up with renewed assurance and pride.

"I cannot see what my private affairs have to do with the matter. I decline to answer any such question."

"Then you have lost the ring? You acknowledge that? There is something concerned with it you have reason to be afraid of, or ashamed of?"

Dick's face suddenly lighted up.

"Ashamed of— But no; I will say no more. It is no one's concern but my own what I did with it."

"Perhaps I can help your memory." The officer's voice grew stern and resolute. "You wore the ring yesterday."

"How do you know that?"

"No matter. Did you, or did you not?"

"Yes, I wore it. What of that?"

"And you decline to tell what you have done with it?"

"I decline."

Dick was puzzled.

"Do you recognize this?"

A ray of light from the lamp penetrated the room. Something in the officer's fingers flashed back a double ray. It was a golden circle, set with a large solitaire diamond. Dick hastily grasped the officer's hand, and fixed his staring eyes on the gleaming gem.

"My ring!" he faltered.

"You acknowledge it, then?"

"How came you by it?"

"I will tell you!" exclaimed his cousin, stepping hastily forward, while his eyes were full

of illy-concealed malice. "You are playing your game well, Dick Racket. I will tell you what the ring proves. I have looked into its light, and have seen there a feeble old man standing on the brink of a rocky precipice. I have seen a young man steal up behind him with murder in his face. I have seen the murderer grasp his victim; seen the old man struggle fiercely a moment for his life, and then flung mercilessly to the foot of the cliff! All this was unseen by man, yet not unwitnessed by Heaven. The victim carried with him the evidence that would convict the murderer—convict you, Richard Racket, for you were the murderer, and your poor uncle, lying on his death-bed in there, the victim!"

"It is a foul lie!" cried Dick, fiercely. "I defy you to prove a word of this neatly-concocted tale! What is the evidence you speak of?"

"This," answered the officer, holding up the ring. "The victim held something firmly clasped in his right hand. The hand was forced open an hour ago, and this taken from it; your ring, torn from your finger by the victim of your deadly assault."

The accused stood speechless with seeming astonishment and confusion. His ring? In the dead man's hand? In an instant the full consequence of this terrible circumstance flashed over his quick mind. He saw himself already condemned in the eyes of the officer. How should he combat this dreadful evidence? How could he prove his innocence? He must be free to do so. There was an array of circumstances in his mind, that meant much to him but might mean nothing to others.

"There is your prisoner! Take him!" cried the cousin, maliciously.

The officers stepped forward and laid their hands on the accused.

"You are our prisoner, Richard Racket!"

Yet, there is many a slip twixt cup and lip. A quick flash burned in Dick's eyes. A double surge of his muscular arms and shoulders, and the surprised officers were sent reeling in opposite directions across the room. The window by which he had entered lay open before him. He dashed hotly toward it.

Phil Morton, shrewdly divining his intention, was there before him. He braced himself to stop the fugitive; but he might as well have tried to stop an avalanche. In an instant he was lifted from his feet, held aloft like a feather, and then flung over Dick's shoulder with a sickening thud to the floor.

An alert leap, and the young man flew, drawn together like a ball, through the open window, and out into the dark night.

The officers rushed to the window, but only in time to see a ladder dashed to the ground. A form was vanishing into the darkness. There came the flash of a pistol at the open window. Whether or not the fugitive was hit could not be told. He had vanished into the night.

CHAPTER IV.

A MORNING'S STILL HUNT.

"THIS is the spot, gentlemen."

It was Phil Morton who spoke. There were with him the doctor, and a group of men, several of them in police uniform. They stood on a grassy spot, on the very brink of what seemed to be a precipice. Just before them lay a shelf of rock, and then a sheer descent into a great open cavity in the earth's surface. Looking carefully over the edge there was visible a perpendicular wall of rock of some thirty feet in depth. At the bottom was a rocky floor, partly covered with water, while just below was a heap of earth and small bits of stone.

"This is the old quarry. My poor uncle was found on that dirt-pile below."

Out of the men in citizen's clothes, a smooth-faced, very keen-looking individual, whose eyes had been taking in every feature of the situation, now turned to the speaker.

"Is this quarry on his grounds?"

"Yes. He was in the habit of walking this way every morning."

"Every morning?"

"He was always back by twelve."

"He was missed, and found about three. Then you think he must have lain here for several hours?"

"That is my theory." Phil Morton looked very earnest and serious. There was crape on his features as well as on his hat.

The detective, for such was the profession of the questioner, continued to look closely about him. Nothing seemed to escape his eyes.

"This is a dangerous spot for an old man to roam in," he remarked. "He might easily lose

his head and fall over without help. Who found that ring in his hand?"

"I did," answered the doctor. "The hand was clinched with an iron force. It was several hours before the muscles relaxed. There lay the ring, in remarkable evidence of the crime."

"I see," was the somewhat indifferent reply. "And you found the body, Mr. Morton?"

"I and one of my servants. Look over here and you can see the very spot where it lay. It was all curled up as if with pain. But excuse me. Keep back, gentlemen. You may disturb the marks of the struggle."

He pointed to the spot before them, on the brink of the cliff. Here the grass was trodden for a good space, and the earth disturbed and kicked up. The officers gathered around it and inspected it with professional eyes.

"Is there a footmark here that can be measured?" asked the detective.

One of the policemen bent and closely examined the marks. He shook his head.

"Nothing distinct enough for that."

The detective turned again to Mr. Morton, from whose cold face every spark of expression had been banished.

"Your uncle was seventy-five?"

"Just past that age."

"Feeble?"

"Yes, poor old man. That adds to the enormity of the crime."

"And your scapegrace cousin is young and strong?"

"An athlete, sir."

"That gives the affair a strange look, rejoined the officer, musingly. "There are the marks of a hard struggle. No sign here of a sparrow in the claws of an eagle."

Phil Morton's stolid face showed a momentary look of uneasiness. He replied somewhat hastily:

"Mr. Wilmot was not the man to yield without a fight for his life. All who know him can testify to that. And these deepest marks are where the murderer braced himself to give his victim a fling."

"You seem to have the whole affair very neatly laid out," the detective coldly replied, while his eyes were shrewdly fixed on the face of the speaker. "I presume that you and your cousin were not the best of friends."

"I have nothing against him. It is true I never approved of his wildness."

He seemed not quite at ease under the steady gaze of the detective, and turned away toward the brink of the cliff.

"The place has not been thoroughly searched," he remarked. "That is the main reason why your presence was desired. It is possible that some new evidence may be discovered."

At the suggestion the officers set themselves to a thorough inspection of the locality. Not two minutes had passed ere one of them sprung to his feet, with something clasped between his fingers.

"Here is evidence of some kind," he remarked, handing it to the detective. "It is a gold pencil-case, with a monogram."

The detective closely examined it. The monogram was readily made out. It consisted of the letters "R. R." curiously twisted together. While this was going on Phil Morton continued to gaze into the quarry, as if not interested in the matter.

"R. R.," murmured the detective, as he inspected the pencil. "Do you recognize this trinket, sir?"

He handed it to Morton.

"No. Those are my cousin's initials, I am sorry to say. I have had nothing to do with him for years."

During all the conversation the detective had seemed quite as much interested in Phil Morton's countenance as in the investigation. He now put the pencil in his pocket, noted closely the exact spot where it had been found, and walked away.

"We will descend and examine the lower level," he said.

Nothing was discovered here, and the party returned toward the house.

"There is one other bit of evidence you had better take," remarked Phil. "This man can give it to you."

He pointed to a roughly-dressed countryman, who had recently joined the group.

"I dunno as I kin say much, and I'd loike to say nothin', fur Mr. Dick's been allers good to me," was the reply, in a tone of rough honesty. "Yet I must say as I see'd him yestern, a half-mile off beyant, and comin' from this-a-way. He looked drefful worried, and in a proper hurrv."

"Aha!" cried the officer. "You are sure of him?"

"Why, I know him like a keerd. He was flurried, like a man out o' sperits."

"What time was this?"

"Mayhap little short o' twelve. Fur the sun stood square above head."

"What is your name, my friend?"

"Jock Rundle, at your sarvice."

"Very well, Jock. Don't forget this. You may have to tell it somewhere else."

Phil Morton had walked on, as if he took no interest in the subject of this conversation.

The detective's eyes continued to curiously follow him. He now abruptly left the countryman and walked quickly forward.

"I think that's about all we can do here, Mr. Morton," he remarked. "Much depends on the result of your uncle's condition. If he recovers his speech send for me at once. To tell the truth, the affair looks bad for young Racket. He must be arrested."

"If he can be found."

"Do you know anything about his associates?"

"I should prefer not to tell. But justice goes before blood. Come back to the house. There is some information which I feel bound to give you, though I'd rather it came from any one but myself."

"We will not accompany them. It is rather our duty to follow up the fugitive, and trace his steps after his hasty flight."

It was eight o'clock the next morning when he found himself in the presence of one of his sporting associates. Just where he had spent the night did not appear. But since daybreak he had called on several of his prodigal friends with very ill luck. They had all been absent except one, who had bluntly declined to see him.

He was a sorry sight when he found himself in the presence of Hal Hastings, a very soft-voiced individual, with a wandering eye. Dick was wet and weary-looking, his coat splattered with mud from seam to collar.

"I'm a sweet picture, Hal!" he exclaimed, as he flung himself heavily into a seat. "I needn't tell you what's up. You've read the papers and I know they've got it all in. The peelers are after me, hot-foot."

Hal looked disturbed and uneasy. It was evident that his visitor was not welcome. He tried, however, to put a fair face on the matter.

"It's a serious charge," he muttered, uneasily. "I'm sorry to hear it, Dick. And the evidence, they say—"

"Deuce take the evidence! What's the evidence when it's me. Dick Racket, whom you know like a book? Drop that confounded suspicious tone if you don't want a settler. I'm here for shelter, Hal. I'm a fugitive from the law. I want you to put me in hiding."

"Why, I should be glad to do anything for you. But— Nobody could be hidden here— And—"

"And you wouldn't hide me if you could, eh?" Dick was growing angry.

"It's a dangerous business, you know. Accessory after the fact.—To help keep a murderer from the law—"

He said no more. A back-handed slap from Dick closed his lips.

"I'm a murderer, am I, you turnip-souled specimen of a pap-sucker! Take that, and put it into your posset. The blind fool I have been to make friends of such a crew as I've had around me. Serves me right!"

Dick's fair-weather friend made no reply to these fierce words. He stood rubbing his pale lips, while his eyes had in them a lurking threat.

"You swallow that, do you, you cowardly dog?" continued the enraged visitor. "Lucky for you. If you'd lifted your hands in reply, I'd not left a whole bone in your ugly carcass!"

He turned and left the room, slamming the door indignantly behind him. In his short visit he had not only failed to obtain shelter, but had made himself a dangerous enemy.

We cannot closely follow all Dick's movements that morning. He called on several others of his fair-weather friends, but all with the same general result. One had one reason for not giving him shelter, another had another excuse.

"I am only a boarder, you know, Dick. I have only a room, and that in the attic."

"I am off this morning for Boston, on important business, or I'd do my best."

"You're a fool to get yourself into such a scrape, that's all I've got to say. And I'd be a fool to help a fool."

Such were some of the answers he received to his demand for shelter.

He left them all with angry words, except the last speaker, at whose remark he burst into a fit of laughter.

"Hang it, Tom, I rather like you for that. If you are a dead beat, you don't smooth it over with soft-soap like those smooth-water gudgeons. Come, old sucker, haven't you a change of rig to fit a fool of my size? I'm not in shape to be seen abroad."

Tom looked at his visitor with a doubtful eye.

"I don't forget that I owe you a good many favors, Dick Racket. You've played the fool for five years. It wasn't for me to tell you while I was helping to soak in your shillings, but I'm ready to tell you now, if it'll be any good to you. I ain't ungrateful, Dick. I'd hide you if I had a hole to cover you. As for a change of rig, I've only one that would fit your stout carcass. I'm ashamed to offer it to you."

"Trot it out. It can't be worse than this."

"Come this way then. A saint can do no better than his best."

He led to an upper room, where he took from a closet a suit of clothes and spread it over a chair. Dick looked at the garments with a questioning glance. The coat had a red collar and wristbands, and great brass buttons.

"Hang it, man, are you going to put me in livery?" he demanded.

"Best I can do. That's what I wore when I drove Jenkins's coach-and-four. You want a disguise."

Dick looked at him for a moment, and then burst into another laugh.

"Your impudence is certainly refreshing, Tom Vance. So this is the end of my wild fling? To be put in livery by one of my old chums! I like this. It's good, blast me if it isn't! All right, old fellow, I'll take your offer. Beggars can't be choosers, and I need a disguise."

Ten minutes afterward Dick the fugitive scapegrace presented a remarkably changed aspect. He stood in a spruce coachman's rig, top-boots, livery coat, silk hat with red rosette. It fitted him to a charm, and he looked the handsome jockey out and out.

"This is getting down in the world with a vengeance," he declared with a reckless laugh, as he surveyed himself in the glass. But I flatter myself that I'm not a bad-looking coachman. If I only get a chance at the ribbons now I'll make things spin. Best clean up that woe-begone suit of mine, Tom. You might have visitors, and that muddy coat would look suspicious. Good-by, old lad, you're not the worst of the crowd."

Dick was off, as gay as a lark. He was not the person to be long down-hearted, and he laughed as he looked at himself on his way through the streets. It was now full day. He was in a suburban part of the good city of Philadelphia, in which the events just narrated had taken place. Habitations were thinly scattered, and not many persons were abroad.

A policeman met him ere long, and gazed at him with an inquisitive eye. A quick change of expression came upon Dick's mobile face. His reckless, high-bred aspect disappeared, and a look of stupid trouble marked his countenance. He stopped, with a show of hesitation.

"Mebbe you couldn't be tellin' me where Mr. Reuben Gosling lives, hereabouts?" he inquired. "I've been huntin' him till I'm blue in the gills."

"Don't know any such person," replied the officer shortly.

"Come over from Jersey City yester eve to take service with him. I've lost the directions, and can't make nothin' of this here straight-backed town. I know it was somewhere 'bout Sixtieth street. But whereabouts I give up."

"That's Sixtieth street next below there," rejoined the officer in a surly tone. "Don't know your man."

"Much obliged. I'll ax the next perlitte policeman."

Dick walked away with a swing, leaving the officer to follow him with a look half-doubt, half-anger. The pretended coachman took care not to look back until he reached a corner. Turning this, he glanced around, and saw that the officer had not moved.

"When in doubt play a trump," he remarked, with a laugh. "That chap has seen me twenty times before, and he's dubious now. It won't pay for me to keep the street."

Within a half-hour afterward the disguised fugitive found himself in a comfortable room, furnished in a sporting fashion, and in the presence of his friend Will West, who was gazing at him in doubt and question.

"I've heard of it all. It's in one of the morn-

ing papers," he remarked, with a disturbed countenance. "It's a terribly serious matter. Where have you been? Where did you get that absurd dress? What are you going to do?"

"There's questions enough for a conversation book," rejoined Dick, flinging his hat on a table and seating himself carelessly. "Guess I can answer them, however. I'm in a deuce of a scrape, Will, to begin. There's a confounded lying charge against me, which I can't rebut except I keep my freedom. I've got to hide somewhere, for the police are after me like greyhounds. As to where I've been, I've made the round of the lads this morning, and with what luck do you think?"

"Kicked out by them all."

"As good as that."

"I could have told you that would be the end years ago, but you wouldn't listen."

"Can you find me a hiding-place?"

"I'll do my best, Dick. And go to prison for you, if that will serve."

"Good boy! You're sound coin." He grasped Will's hand in warm appreciation. "It's worth spending a fortune to find one solid friend."

"Tell me all about it, Dick."

The fugitive, with as much ease of manner as if he had been in perfect safety, related the events of the morning.

Will shook his head at the end of the narration.

"Do you know you've played the fool, Dick?" he asked. "You've spoilt your chances, you hasty ninny. It was not enough to have lukewarm friends, but you must make active foes. That back slap you gave Hal Hastings may checkmate your whole game. I would bet high that by this time he has posted the police in all your possible hiding-places."

"Wish I'd flung the hound out the window and broken his neck," growled Dick.

"Won't do. You've sold your best chance for a hand-slap. Wait a minute."

He hurried to the window and looked out through the half-open blinds. After a minute he turned back with an alarmed look.

"By all that's good, the hounds are on the track already! Here comes a group of them straight this way. The dog's dead, Dick! They've smelt you out here, and I haven't a hole that would hide a cat."

CHAPTER V.

DICK AND THE DETECTIVE.

It was an alarming situation. Dick sprang hastily up and glanced through the blinds. He saw a group of men in citizens' dress, rapidly approaching the house.

"They are officers," continued Will. "I know that leading fellow. He is one of the main detectives at the Central." Will looked at his visitor in consternation. "The back door, Dick. That is the only chance left. Quick, my hearty."

"Won't do," answered Dick, shortly. "Two of the party are slipping round that way. It is all up if we can't play it on them from within. Hold up a minute till I run the business over in my head."

He stood a moment reflectively, his eyes fixed on his friend, who wore a flowered dressing-gown and embroidered slippers. A flash came into Dick's keen eye.

"You know that detective. Does he know you?"

"No."

"That's clever. I've got it. We'll change parts, my boy. Off with that dressing-gown and slippers. Here, you can have my boots and coat. You'll look jolly in livery. Quick, lad. Hang it, we'll sell them yet."

Hardly a minute passed ere the gentleman of the house was transformed to a liveried servant. Dick stood in shirt-sleeves and stockinged feet, surveying him approvingly.

"Away, my lively spark. This is a jolly joke. If we sell the peelers we'll crack a bottle on it. Slide like sin."

The new-made coachman disappeared, leaving his visitor alone in the sunny and well-furnished sitting-room.

He was absent scarcely two minutes, when he returned, ushering in a group of sharp-faced men. But in that two minutes a transformation had taken place in Dick.

He was in a dressing-gown and slippers, a smoking-cap on his head, a cigar between his lips, and his face so changed in expression that he looked like another man. He was seated in an arm-chair, which was pushed lightly back on two legs, while Dick's feet rested on the table edge. In his hand was an open novel, which he seemed to be diligently perusing. He looked up from the book as the visitors entered.

"Some gentlemen to see you, sir," announced the new-made servant.

"Ah! How do you do, gentlemen? Glad to see you. Chairs, Jack. Please be seated. And—But pray excuse me one moment. Is the carriage ready, Jack?"

"I haven't had time to harness yet, sir."

"Very well. Have it ready in a half-hour. Excuse me, gentlemen. Will that be time enough for your business? I have an engagement at eleven."

"Probably," answered the foremost visitor, a smooth-faced, keen-eyed personage, who seemed to take in the whole room at a glance.

"That will do, Jack."

The new-made servant disappeared.

"And now, gentlemen, I have not the honor of your acquaintance, and shall be glad to know why you have favored me with this visit."

Dick laid down his book, and dropped his chair to the floor, while he waited in easy politeness for an answer.

"Mr. West, I presume?"

"At your service."

"You are acquainted, I believe, with one Richard Racket?"

"Dick Racket? Well, I should imagine so. And a whole-souled chap he is, too, though I see by the morning papers that he is in serious trouble. There's a lie out somewhere, gentlemen. Dick isn't that sort of man."

"We are here in reference to that," was the reply. "I may as well tell you plainly that I'm a detective officer, and am here with a warrant for the arrest of Mr. Racket. You are said to be one of his special friends. It is our duty to see if you have concealed him."

"Policemen, by Jupiter!" cried Dick, springing up, and kicking back his chair with an angry movement. "I'll be hanged if I built on that type of visitors this morning! I tell you what, gentlemen, I'm a square man—out and out. But I'm not the chap to go back on a friend. If Dick Racket applied to me I'd hide him if I had to cover him with my own skin and lend him my own bones. That's me. Go ahead now. Find him if you can. Here's the house. Shall I show you through it?"

"It is not necessary. We can make our way," was the dry answer.

"I've no doubt. And maybe more than your way. Let me see your warrant. You are strangers to me."

The officer handed Dick a folded paper. He quickly opened and perused it.

"That is in form. Go ahead, then. Of course you must do your duty. I tell you what, sir, if you want Dick Racket, it is not safe to leave me out of sight. If he is in this house I'll do my prettiest to get him out of it. That's my sort."

The detective looked quizzically at the gayly-attired speaker.

"Perhaps you had better go with us," he dryly remarked. "I hardly care to leave such an outspoken defier of the law to his own devices."

"All right," laughed Dick. "I am at your service. But I warn you that you won't nab Dick Racket while I can help him. I'm the best friend he has in this town."

"That's an open challenge," returned the officer, amazed at the bold defiance of his host. "Let me set eyes on him and I fancy your good-will won't help him much."

"You don't know him. If Dick Racket stood before you as plain as I do this minute, he'd cheat you, sharp as you are."

"Would he, eh? Let him try it on."

The door opened at that instant, and the counterfeit coachman appeared.

"Excuse me, Mr. West. But the off horse has a loose shoe. Can you wait till I get it tightened?"

"I'll have to, I suppose. Hurry up, man. Time presses."

The coachman again vanished. The officers had now commenced their search, beginning with the room in which they stood. Here, however, there was no opportunity for concealment, and they quickly passed on to other parts of the house.

Dick accompanied the detective with whom he had held the conversation, continuing to smoke as he led him from room to room.

"Not much hiding room in a modern house," he laughed, as he sent the smoke curling above his head. "The deep closets of old have grown shallow as a miser's conscience, and the thick walls with their secret stairways are now only pathways for mice, not men. This door leads to the cellar."

"We must search it for form's sake. But I begin to fancy that our man is not hid in your house, Mr. West."

"Why, I am of the same opinion myself."

The officer opened the cellar door just in time. For at that instant one of the women of the house passed by, and stood in astonishment on seeing this strange gentleman in her master's dressing-gown, and called by her master's name. She would have uttered some exclamation, but that she was checked by a quick sign from Dick's hand.

"Not a word," he whispered, as the detective descended the stair. "It is a joke of your master's. Not a word!"

The woman vanished, with a broad grin on her face.

Five minutes afterward the detective reappeared.

"Sorry to have troubled you, Mr. West. But duty commands. I can give you a clean bill of health. No murderer's concealed here!"

"Whoever told you that Dick Racket is a murderer, tell him he is a liar!" was Dick's answer. "As for finding him, you don't know the sort of man you are after. You may keep up the hunt for six months, and I'll bet you a cool hundred you don't come nearer to him than you are this minute."

"I'll take that bet," said the officer, with professional pride.

"All right. I mean it. Shake hands on it. Good-by. I hope you may not win your bet."

"I intend to," answered the detective, determinedly. "Good-by."

The party withdrew, Dick politely seeing them to the door. But the portal was no sooner closed than he was back with a hop, step and skip to the sitting-room, where the real Will West, in his coachman's uniform, awaited him.

Dick's cap went with a wild send to the ceiling, he kicked his slippers right and left, while he fell back in his chair laughing fit to kill.

"It's a sell worth a thousand!" he exclaimed.

"They have a written description of me, too. Yet I humbugged them to their eyes. Got a bet with that detective that he never comes nearer me than he was five minutes ago. It's rich, Will."

"Rich as cream. I always said you were built for the stage, Dick. You take a part like a born actor. Now sit quiet and tell me the balance of the affair. What happened after you left us last night?"

"Keep mum and I will tell you."

Dick proceeded to relate the events of the preceding night, and to add to it certain items of information of which the reader is yet in ignorance.

"There you have the whole story, my lad. Keep it to yourself, for I don't want the world to know it."

"There's one point you've left out."

"What is that?"

"The words your uncle gave you before he dropped off again."

"Oh! that was only wandering breath."

"Maybe not. I am good at guessing riddles."

"That's more than I am. Well, this is the pith of it. I fancy it's a mere string of words. 'It is hidden—in the—brown back—Shake—.' That was all. And spoken in that broken fashion."

Will sat looking at him intently, while a look of intelligence passed over his face.

"Your uncle was a great reader?"

"Yes. A regular book-worm."

"Then he would naturally refer to books. 'Shake' is only half a word. Make it Shakespeare."

Dick kicked his chair half across the room, as he sprang wildly up.

"Hang my stupidity! You are a jewel, Will! 'It is hidden in the brown-back Shakespeare.' Why, there's the whole secret in a nutshell!"

"Or something to put you on the track of it. But did he say nothing more?"

"Nothing. He began again, 'In the—.' Then he paused and called me by name, 'Richard.' I answered him, but that was the last. He spoke no other word."

"You are wool-gathering again, you thick head!" cried Will, energetically. "You want a fellow like me to read your riddles. 'In the Richard—' There's meaning enough there for a wise man, you blunderhuss! Look in the play of Richard the Third, of the brown-back Shakespeare. If you find nothing there then my guessing is all amiss."

"By the nose of St. Patrick, but you've hit it! The book is in my uncle's library. I must get in there by hook or crook, danger or no. And now to get out of your house. It is not safe quarters."

"Right again! Your brain's worth two of mine! Order up that bottle of wine. We'll crack it to drink to your wit."

CHAPTER VI.

THE LIBRARY AND ITS WARDER.

Two days have passed since the date of the events last narrated. Dick Racket, the fugitive is still at large, though the authorities have made a diligent search for him.

It was night again, dark and starless. A sharp frost had burdened the road along which Dick had taken his rough ride. Around Beechcroft, Mr. Wilmot's mansion, all was deathly still. The old man was still hanging between life and death, and the house had the stillness and gloominess of a vault. He had not spoken or moved since Dick's voice had called him back for a minute's space to life.

In the outbuilding back of the house sat old Tony, cowering over his fire. He was not alone, however, but was accompanied by Jerry, the servant who had given Dick the warning. The two old men were engaged in a crooning conversation.

"He suspects me," said Jerry. "He has made inquiries about who had old Hickory from his stall that night. He suspects me."

"Let him," answered Tony. "I'd give my life for Master Richard. Let him. He can only discharge you. That needn't hurt a spry young chap like you much."

"Young!" laughed Jerry. "And me turned three-score. I'm not a baby, at least. But it's a dreadful business, Tony. I'd stake my hand on Master Richard's innocence. Wherever can he be? The police are all at fault."

"Let him alone for that," and old Tony rubbed his hands gleefully over the stove. "Master Richard's far too much for 'em."

"I hope so. But he's wild and reckless, and they're wary and foxy. I dread he'll be putting his head into their noose. I dread it sorely."

"Not much, old lad. I ain't quite the fool you're buying me for."

At this unexpected voice the two old cronies sprung to their feet with a cry of alarm. Tony so hastily that he nearly fell over the stove.

"It's not a warlock, old friends. It's only Dick Racket, your loose-footed boy."

The speaker, who had stood till now in the doorway, walked forward, and displayed Dick's sturdy figure and open, handsome face.

"What brings you here?" cried Jerry, half-angrily, his hands extended as if to repel the intruder. "Fly, you foolish man! You are in peril here every minute."

"Not so much, old fellow," Dick coolly seated himself. "They don't look for the fox in the dog kennel. Keep your scare to yourself, Jerry. Wildcap Dick isn't such a fool as you fancy. Come, now, I want to know the lay of the land."

"Suppose Mr. Morton should come in here?" and Jerry trembled. "He's forever spying around."

"It might be in the door and out the window, then. So he is on the ground, eh? He has taken possession?"

"Yes, sir. And a hard master he promises to be!"

"If all works well he'll not be master long," Dick's lips closed with a decided movement. "But your old master, Jerry! My poor old uncle?"

Jerry shook his head disconsolately.

"No change. No change. I fear he will never open eyes or mouth again."

"And they accuse me of his murder! And a sweet train they've laid against me! But time cures many things, old man. Amos Wilmot was a hard man. He has done me many wrongs. But it's no time to remember them now, when he's lying there the victim of a foul trick."

"I know it all, sir. You're quite right. If you had justice. But that's not to the point now, when the air is full of danger. Mr. Wilmot is not dead yet, thank Heaven. He may live to do his duty by his brother's son. But you will not stay here, Master Richard?"

"No."

"And you will go quickly?"

"Just so. Into the house. You must open the door for me, Jerry."

"Into the house?" The trembling old man held up his hands in horror. "You never mean it, sir? There are officers there this minute!"

"A fig for them. I have an errand in the library. You must lead me there on the sly, and keep the coast clear. I shall not be long."

Jerry would have attempted some further remonstrance, but he knew the temper of the young spendthrift too well to try it. He rose with a groan of distress.

"You needn't come if you're afraid, old fellow," said Dick, kindly. "Let me inside the door and leave me to make my own way. Trust me to hoe my track."

"You are not to be trusted," declared the old man, resolutely. "Come. If you must go I will not desert my old master's son."

They moved through the dark of the yard toward the house rear. All was still. Not a light was visible. The old man's hand trembled as he laid it on the door, which he had but recently left unfastened behind him.

In a moment it was opened and shut. They were in a passage of midnight gloom.

"Give me your hand, Jerry. You know the way in the dark. Lead me toward the library."

Beechcroft was an old fashioned, rambling structure, with no end of ins and outs, wings and corners, and wandering ways and passages. Dick knew it well, as years of his younger life had been spent in it, yet he was not quite prepared to trust himself in the thick darkness that now hung over it.

"Hadh't we best strike a light?"

"No, no," cried Jerry, hurriedly. "I know the way, every inch. Come very quietly, Master Richard. This house has ears."

He caught Dick's hand and led cautiously onward, treading as if shod with feathers, and seeming as if half afraid to breathe.

The way seemed endless. Up and down steps, through long passages, and around corners, with not a ray of light to break the utter darkness of the situation.

"Hang it, old lad, this is Robin Hood's barn with a vengeance. I never thought the old house was quite so crazy."

"Hush! We are at the spot now. This is the library."

"Faith, all cats are of one color in the dark. Strike a light, Jerry. I have a little job to do here that needs a glim. Won't be long, so don't get nervous."

Jerry struck a match, and lit a lamp that stood on a table in the center of the room. The light revealed a broad, spacious room, surrounded on three sides with bookcases, well filled with volumes. It had also many cosy nooks and easy-chairs, and seemed a comfortable place to spend a winter's day.

"There is my uncle's favorite chair," said Dick, looking eagerly around him. "Here is where my father loved to sit. And many a boyish hour have I spent on that stool in the window nook, buried in a fairy tale. Hallo! Jerry, are you going to leave me in the dark again?"

The old man had turned down the light very low.

"The light was too strong," declared Jerry. "It is dangerous here, for you and me both."

"Then you slide, and only one will be in danger. Go, old fellow! I will manage my own game now, and don't want to get you into trouble."

The old man was willing enough to take this advice. He hastened from the room, leaving Dick alone in its center.

He stood for several minutes, looking around him with eyes that were full of old recollections.

"Ah! if I could have those boyish days over again," he said with a sigh. "I have never been so happy since, in all my wild frolics. But a lost hope never comes back. I've played the fool, and have got to reap the fool's harvest. Well, well, it's babyish to cry over spilt milk. Here I am in the lion's den. Old Jerry's right. It's no place to stand dreaming. Now for the brown-back Shakespeare."

It looked as if it might be a hard task to find any particular volume in such a maze of books, but Dick luckily was well acquainted with the ways of the library, and knew almost where to lay his hand on the work in question.

Shakespeare had apparently been a favorite author. It was there in a half-dozen different forms and bindings. But there was only one edition that seemed to answer to his uncle's words. This was in several large volumes, bound in a brownish leather, well worn, and apparently very old and valuable.

Dick, after inspecting the others in their spruce new dresses, took down a volume of this venerable edition.

"Old reliable," he said. "I remember the work. It's about two centuries old, and worth a small farm. Now for the hump-backed Richard."

He hastily hunted through the index for the play in question. Finding it, he turned over the antiquated leaves, with their black-letter print, and with the rusty smell of age arising from them. A few minutes sufficed for him to go through it all. There was nothing there. A look of disappointment came upon his face.

"By thunder and lightning!" he groaned.

"Am I sold after all? Oh, if my uncle had only been able to finish his sentence. It may be some clew in the words of the play. It may be— Could I have mis-ed anything?"

He returned to the front of the play and went over it again leaf by leaf, with great care. At the beginning of the third act one of the leaves seemed unusually thick. He examined it more closely, and found that it was really two leaves, fastened together.

A throb of hope pulsed in Dick's veins. In an instant he had his penknife in his hand, and was separating the leaves, which were lightly glued at their edges.

As he did so a folded paper fell from between them to the floor.

"Eureka!" he cried, with heedless loudness. "I have read the riddle. I am on the track at last."

He stooped and snatched up the important document. While he stood thus, the heavy book in one hand, the new-discovered paper in the other, he heard a sudden sound behind him. Ere he could turn it was followed by a loud outcry:

"Thief! Murderer! Midnight plunderer! Stand, on your life, or you are a dead man!"

Dick hastily turned. There stood his worthy cousin, with pale face and glaring eyes, a revolver in his hand, pointed with what seemed a deadly aim at the head of the intruder.

"Not a motion! Not a step, or I send this bullet through your brain!" he cried, in a tone of triumph. "You have had your day, Dick Racket. It is my turn now. But I never thought you would add midnight burglary to your other dark deeds. Drop that paper you have stolen, and yield yourself my prisoner."

Dick stood and looked at the speaker, a shade of amusement mingled with the vexation in his eye. He made a quick movement as if to put the document in his pocket, but there came an ominous click of the pistol-lock.

"Hold there, or I will shoot you as I would a dog!" Phil's voice showed that he meant it. "I have the whip hand now, my lively cousin. You go from here to a prison, to be tried for the double crime of burglary and murder. Seat yourself in that chair; drop that stolen paper; throw up your hands, or by Heaven—"

"Dry up, you blustering fool!" cried Dick, scornfully. "It's not the first time I've looked into the muzzle of a pistol, Phil. You can save your blather, for you haven't the heart to shoot at a fly."

"Haven't I?" his lips were white with rage.

There came a flash and quick report. Whether purposely, or through excitement, he had pulled the trigger. Dick staggered back as if he had been struck. But fortunately at that instant he had held the book in front of his breast. Into that the bullet had buried itself, directly over his heart!

"A miss is as good as a mile!" he exclaimed, recovering, and flinging the heavy volume at the head of his assailant. It took Phil full in the forehead, and down he went as if he had been shot.

Dick made a hasty spring forward toward the library door. But he suddenly checked himself and fell back, with his hands thrown up in terror, and his eyes fixed as upon a specter. His foe, who had instantly sprung again to his feet, also stood transfixed with horror.

For there before them the chair of his uncle, a minute before empty, was now occupied by a deathlike figure, with snow-white hair, and a face of spectral pallor. On the moveless countenance was a look of angry reproach. The thin hand was uplifted and seemed pointing indignantly at the door.

"He is dead! dead! It is his ghost!" screamed Phil in terror, as he broke with blind horror for the outer passage.

"The ghost of uncle Wilmot! And back among his books!" cried Dick, little less scared, and following his cousin in his hasty flight.

In an instant they were in the darkness of the outer hall. The door swung to. The spectral figure of the murdered man had driven all intruders from his favorite room, and taken possession from the grave.

There was a wild rush forward. Phil was heard plunging headlong down a flight of stairs, his pistol again exploding in the fall.

Dick, startled as he had been, could not help a burst of bitter laughter, as he heard this promiscuous tumble. With more caution he sought an avenue of escape.

And it was none too soon. The whole house was awake. He crouched in a side room as a light approached. It was a half-dressed policeman hurrying forward toward the locality of the pistol-shots.

In a minute more Dick encountered old Jerry, also with a light in his hand. The old fellow was quivering like a leaf.

"Is it you, Mr. Richard?" he cried, joyfully, "you are not killed?"

"No, but some one else is. The house is a haunt of ghosts. My uncle's specter, Jerry, is behind us. Hurry, old man, to the door! To the door!"

Jerry needed no further admonition. In a minute more Dick was safe out of the haunted house, with his prize still clasped in his hand.

CHAPTER VII.

THE STORY OF A LIFE.

"CAN I trust you, Will? Right through? Square up? With my life if need be?"

"In anything honest," was the answer. "I'm your friend while you are your own. I fancy you're a square man, Dick."

The two speakers were seated in a dilapidated room of a shabby old mansion, in an obscure region of the city. The furniture was old, broken and down-looking, as if every piece was mourning over its lost splendor. The plaster hung in flakes on walls and ceiling. Along the latter were open cracks, discolored with marks of dripping rains. The place had evidently seen better days in the years long past, but was now fast sinking to ruin and decay.

"I want a friend, my boy. And out of the dozens that I have been flinging away my money on, you are the only one that has shown an ounce of heart and conscience. I have a story to tell you, Will. But not a word till I first have your promise to stick by Dick Racket, the Scapegrace, but not the rogue."

"To the death, Dick. We have had wild times together. But nobody but ourselves is the worse for our wildness."

"There's a mystery hanging over me. I can't explain how my ring got into that old man's hand. But I can swear the crime was not mine."

"I believe you. But have you no suspicions of the real criminal? How did the ring pass from your possession?"

"That I cannot tell. I have my suspicions. Yet even then I cannot in honor divulge. I am seeking for evidence. I am here in search of it to-day. It is for that I have brought you to this tumble-down old rat-trap. It is for that I have kept clear of the police."

"Hang me if I understand you! At any rate the affair may not prove so bad. Amos Wilmot is alive yet."

"Ha! Are you sure of that?"

"I heard it only this afternoon. He has recovered from his swoon, they say. He can move, but his senses seem to have vanished."

"Then it was not his ghost? Not that I half-believed it was."

"His ghost? What do you mean?"

Dick proceeded to relate the account of his visit to the library, with its startling termination, with which the reader is already familiar.

Will whistled.

"Lord! It would have scared me out of a year's growth. But you got the document?"

"Yes. Keep quiet still. I have another story for your ears. I have acted like a mad fool, Will. So folks say, and they are not far wrong. I have flung away my money as if it were chaff. You know that, for you he'ped me in the laudable effort. Yet I have not been quite an idiot. What's money for but to buy pleasure? But for my tale. My father died, as you may know, when I was a mere child. The cash I have flung to the winds in the last five years was not all his possessions. Beechcroft, and all the property which my worthy uncle now holds, belonged to my father. After his death, when the will was read, only the ready cash was left directly to me. All the landed property was left in Amos Wilmot's care as guardian. He had the privilege of selling it, if it appeared best according to his judgment. It did appear best."

Dick's voice had grown very sarcastic.

"Do you think there was fraud?"

"I know that it went for a song. I know that the man who bought it did not keep it, but that it fell into Amos Wilmot's hands at his own price. I know that the sale was only a cleverly contrived trick."

"The deuce! And the money it brought?"

"I have made ducks and drakes of that."

"You had better have used it in a lawsuit against your rascally uncle. The law does not allow a trustee to sell a property for his own benefit."

"He covered up his track, Will. There is no hope there. But there is an opening in another

direction. The will he sold under was not the latest. My father left another."

"Aha!"

"He left another which is yet in existence. I am sure of it. I caught the hint of it once from an incautious remark by my uncle. Another man knows it, too. Phil Morton, my rascally cousin. He is after it as well as I. He wants it to destroy. I want it to use. If it never turns up he will be Amos Wilmot's heir, and I left out in the cold. If it is found all the property is mine."

"I see. A sweet bit of rascality."

"It was that drove me to my wild life. I was reckless and revengeful. My uncle treated all my requests for justice in a way to rouse the devil in me. That is the secret of my five years' fling. You were present when I heard the story of the accident to my uncle. I rode away like mad, hoping that the approach of death might force him to restore my stolen birthright. It did. Conscience stirred him to put me on the track of the hidden secret."

"And you found it in the old Shakespeare?"

"No."

"What was it you found, then? You discovered something."

"A worthless document, Will. A vile farago. My hopes are dashed to the ground. Here is the rascally concern. See if you can read its riddle."

He dashed the paper on the table.

Will opened the paper thus flung to him. It was a narrow sheet, which was covered by some half-dozen lines of what at first seemed writing. But a closer inspection revealed only a series of meaningless marks, that bore some distant resemblance to letters, but of which nothing could be made.

"There's something in it, Dick. I'll go high on that. But I don't get the hang of the confounded enigma."

"We're in the same boat, then. I am satisfied that the secret about the will is in this paper. But who is to make it out?"

The two men spent a good half-hour in vain efforts to get some clew to the meaning of the incomprehensible document, but in vain. Dick at length flung it down in disgust.

"Give it up. We'll have to wait for a happy inspiration.—Well, to go on. I'm near the end of my story. There's only the mystery of this murderous business left. It's my notion that Phil Morton is somehow at the bottom of it."

"Phil Morton! What reason have you to think that?"

"Because he is the only one to be benefited by it. He knows that my uncle has made a will in his favor. It was best to put him out of the way before he could change it. He knows that the old will is in existence, and there is always a chance of its discovery while the man that hid it lives. Thirdly, he thought to put the murder on me, and so get rid of a dangerous rival, by the sure method of the rope. How he did it I know not. That is my present business, to trace the mystery of that ring."

"But that is not all. I am told that a gold pencil case, with your initials, was found at the top of the cliff."

"The deuce! I had not heard of that. A gold case, eh?" He fell into a deep fit of musing, while a light came into his eyes.

"I'm glad you told me that. I think I can trace that pencil. It helps to put me on the track. Do you know why I sent for you?"

"No."

"I am safe here from the police. I have risked my safety in sending for you, for you may be followed. But I have an interview laid out, for which I want a witness. And I want a friend who will follow up the trail in case I am nabbed. I believe this house holds the clew to this mystery that surrounds me."

"If you know who took the ring, why not go for him openly?"

"Suppose my suspicions are wrong? Suppose there be a man to whom I owe my life; who took a bullet that was aimed at me? Right or wrong, can I bluntly accuse that man of robbing me, and hold up my head among men of honor afterward?"

"No! By Jove, no!"

"Well, you have the pith of it. There's a woman in it; there always is. Come. This affair needs neat handling."

He rose and led the way from the room, followed closely by his curious friend.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MEETING OF OLD FRIENDS.

THE house in which the interview just described had taken place seemed alive with people. Frowsy-headed women looked out of doors.

Children, ragged and begrimed, played in the passages. A smell of no very agreeable odor came from open rooms. It seemed a tenement-house inhabited by the poorest of the poor.

In one room, in the upper region of the house, sat a man young in years, yet seemingly old in vice and misery. His face was bloated as from habitual intoxication, his eyes red and bleared, his hand trembled as in a nervous delirium.

On the dilapidated table before him was a bottle, on which his eyes were fixed with a look of disdainful scorn.

"Blast your ugly pictur'!" he muttered, in tipsy accents. "Ye're made to hold a quart, shoot ye, and I ain't had a drap more than a pint out o' your corporation. Them's the sort o' glass-blowers we have nowadays."

He turned the bottle upside down, with the hope that some drops might remain within its cavernous depths. But in vain. It was as dry as its tipsy owner. He flung it angrily across the room.

"Take that, drat ye! I never see'd such a blazin' humbug. There comes that blasted Moll. I've a notion to wring her neck fur the way she done me out o' that—"

He stopped suddenly, and retreated tipsily toward his chair. It was not the expected woman that had entered the room, but two men, at sight of whom the old drunkard was seized with a fit of trembling.

"Dick!" he cried in a maundering tone. "Is it old Dick I see afore me? Guv' us your hand, old boy. It's a plaster for sore eyes to see ye, blast me!"

Recovering from his first show of consternation he came staggering forward, with a look of drunken welcome in his bloated face.

"That's all right Joe," answered Dick, cheerfully, clasping the old fellow's hand. "Come, sit down, I want to talk with you. Help yourself to a chair, Will. Let me introduce you, gentlemen. Mr. William West, Mr. Joseph Groggery."

"It does me proud to know the gentleman," answered Joe, with great enthusiasm. "Take a cheer, sir. Take a cheer. Won't ye take some refreshment, gentlemen? It's a dry day."

"Not now," rejoined Dick, seating himself with a look of perfect gravity and respect. "You don't come to see me, Joe, so I come to call on you. You haven't been at my house since— Let me see."

"Since last summer," exclaimed Joe, hastily, and with an odd look of affright in his bleared eyes. "Spankin' old time we had. You got boozy, you jolly coon. Had to take you home, blast me if I hadn't!" He laughed in a croaking and strained tone.

"You forget, Joe. You were there one night last week. You went away again without seeing me, old man."

Joe swayed to and fro with his hands on the table. His head trembled like that of a manikin.

"It's a blazin' lie!" he eagerly declared. "And the chap that told you is a blazin' liar! It's a feller that's playin' off for me. I've heered tell on him. Wants to 'berit my fortune, he does!"

There was a steel-blue glimmer in Dick's eyes as the drunkard said this, in trembling eagerness. He made a hasty step, as if with intent to take Joe by the shoulders and shake the truth out of him. But he restrained himself, with a forced laugh.

"All alone here, old chap? Where's Moll? Ain't gone back on you, eh?"

"Like to wring her neck," declared Joe, in a sudden fury. "Hate her like rank p'isen!"

"Hillo! How's this? I thought you were as sweet as honey-bee and rosebud."

"She's a blamed beat, dang her pictur'! She's—" He checked himself suddenly, while a cunning look came into his red eyes. "Dunno, Moll's prime arter all. 'Tain't fur me to run down a gal that loves me like a brick loves water. You know what she is, Dick."

"Yes, I reckon I do," answered Dick, with a meaning shrug. "But, see here, Joe, is this the way to treat an old friend? In my house there's always a full bottle on the table, and a lunch on the sideboard. Why, you stingy old beggar, are you going to leave me and my friend go away dry?"

"No, nary time!" exclaimed Joe, with a burst of enthusiasm. "Ain't forgot as I was a gentleman once. 'Scuse me a minute, folks."

He rammed his hat fiercely on his head, and started for the door, with both hands thrust deeply into his pockets, as if on a tour of investigation. He was out of the room scarce a minute, however, when he returned with a downcast look on his boosy countenance.

"Blame me if I didn't forget," he declared. "Tom Sparkler's shut down on my tick, and I

ain't got a red till my rents come in. Lend us a shiner, Dick."

"Come, come, old chap. That's not a square deal. Where's your own cash?"

"Moll's got it all," returned Joe in a whisper. "All right, Joe. Here's for you. It's a loan, mind."

"Honor bright!" exclaimed Joe, eagerly snatching up the coin which Dick had cast on the table, and hurrying with staggering steps from the room.

Dick leaned back in the crazy chair that held him, and gazed dubiously across at his companion.

"Looks as if there's no game in this cover," remarked Will.

"There you are slightly mistaken, my boy. I fancy I've unearthed something neat. If I can only follow up the trail I have just broken."

"What do you mean?"

"To begin with, he stole my ring."

"He?"

"Just so. He has the entry to my house, for reasons I will tell you soon. Very well. I fell asleep on a lounge on the evening before our supper-party. The ring was on my finger when I went to sleep. It was gone when I awoke."

"And you think Joe took it?"

"I am sure. He is an honest fellow in grain, but would do anything when craving for liquor. He denies calling on me last week, but the very manner of his denial proves to me that he was there, and did a trick that he is ashamed of."

"It looks like it, indeed. But what did he do with the ring? Pawn or sell it?"

"No. You don't know what a pride he has, Will, in spite of his boosiness. He would have cut his head off rather than ask me for money, if he'd had a red cent of his own. The chap is hospitable. Very well. He received no money for the ring. He was wheedled out of it, or robbed of it by Moll, that fair fiend who has done much to make him what he is."

"Ha! We are now coming to the woman in the case. So Moll has the ring, and it is she that we need to track. But who is Moll, and what is the mystery which you promised to tell me?"

Dick did not answer immediately. He sat with a look of moody indecision on his face. But after a minute he looked up again.

"I may as well make a clean breast of it," he said. "I can trust you, and it may be best for you to know all. I have spoken of Moll—Mary Brandon is her full name—as a fair fiend. When I first set out in my wild life, Will, I was something of a lady's man. I paid attention to several girls, this Mary Brandon among them. She was then a young, strikingly handsome and seemingly innocent maiden, but with the temper of a tigress. I was not her only admirer. Joe Groggery—then a sober and sensible fellow—was demented about her. He was ready to do anything to win her. The girl evidently cared more for me than him, and he was wild with jealousy."

"A sweet little affair all through," muttered Will.

"Trouble ensued, as it always does when men play the fool. Joe, in his jealousy, told her of my attentions to another girl. He led her to see it, in fact, and she grew wild with jealous rage. The tigress in her temper woke up. She attacked me, indeed, with a violent tirade of fury. I grew angry, and repelled her, perhaps too rudely. What followed? She waylaid me during an evening walk with the young lady in question. Joe was with her. You never saw anything quite so like a fiend as she was at that minute. Her eyes blazed like two fiery rockets. Ere a word could be said she had drawn a pistol and fired it point-blank at my breast."

"Jupiter! That was rough work," ejaculated Will. "Were you hit?"

"I would have been done for only for Joe. The noble fellow flung himself between us, and took the bullet in his own breast. Came near dying of it too. He saved my life, Will. I shall not soon forget what I owe him."

"And what drove him to whisky?"

"The woman. She played fast and loose with him till he grew wild and desperate. I did my best to break him of it, but in vain. I have given it up now as useless. He seems bound to drink himself to the grave."

"And the woman?"

"As dissolute as her drunken lover. I have scarcely seen her since. She hates me as fiercely as she once loved me."

At this moment a wavering step in the passage admonished them of Joe's return. He came in through the open door, with a black bottle clinched tightly in one hand, and a plate of biscuit in the other.

"Meat and drink," he declared. "Thought mebbe you gentlemen mought like a bite. And I've got here some prime Bourbon. Just the stuff to warm the wrinkles in your hearts."

He brought the bottle down with a crash as he spoke. With too violent a crash, as it proved, for the brittle glass shivered at the concussion, and the liquor poured pitilessly out of the broken bottle over table and floor.

Joe staggered back, the picture of pitiful consternation, his hands held up in horror, a glitter as of tears bedewing his red eyes.

"Prime Bourbon!" he muttered, licking his lips hungrily. "And all goin' for dishwater! Won't one of you gentlemen punch me in the snout? Ought to have my head bu'sted."

"You stupid idiot!" came a shrill voice from the door. "To waste good whisky at that rate!"

There came a whisk of skirts and the apparition of a woman's form, which darted eagerly across the room and seized the lower half of the bottle which still held some of the liquor.

She stood surveying it with eager eyes, a tall, shapely woman, dressed with some pretense to bravery, and with a face that was still handsome in spite of its marks of intemperance.

"I'm ashamed o' ye, Moll," muttered Joe. "Acting this way afore company. Don't ye see there's an old friend afore ye?"

The woman looked up, caught sight of Dick's face before her, and her look of tipsy fondling over the whisky changed to an expression of insane fury. With flashing eyes she raised the jagged glass with its liquid contents, and flung it madly at the head of her old lover, with a hiss of deadly rage.

Only a quick bend of Dick's head saved him from what might have proved a deadly blow. The glass struck with a crash against the wall, and was dashed into splinters.

In an instant a look of horror replaced the tigerish gleam in the woman's eyes. She dropped to the floor in a moaning heap, as if utterly conscience stricken and overcome by her brief paroxysm of madness.

At the same instant hasty steps were heard in the outer passage, and the forms of several men appeared at the door of the room. A glance revealed that they were officers of the law.

CHAPTER IX.

A MYSTERIOUS ESCAPE.

THERE were three men in the party which had thus suddenly appeared. A glance revealed who they were. At their head was the detective who had been so neatly humbugged by Dick in Will West's house. There was a look of triumphant satisfaction on his face which certainly was not shared by those on whom he had so abruptly intruded. Dick looked as if he had swallowed green persimmons. An oath of suppressed spite broke from Will's lips. Joe Groggery, however, advanced toward them with a tipsy welcome:

"Glad to see ye, gen'lemen. Ye do me honor! Have a biscuit, won't ye? Sorry ter say as ain't got nothin' wet. The rascally old bottle bu'sted, and split all the ingredients." He pointed with a sorrowful countenance to the splintered glass.

The detective advanced with little heed to this greeting. He faced the two friends with a triumphant aspect.

"Glad to meet you again, Mr. West," he said satirically to Dick. "You made a fool of me once, my dear Mr. Racket, but you had the wrong chap to deal with. Every dog has his day, and it's mine now."

"The upshot of which is," answered Dick rather sternly as he rose from his chair, "that you have tracked the fox and are here to arrest me?"

"Just so. Smart as you were you failed to close all the tracks to your den. I am much obliged to you, Mr. West," bowing to Will, "for calling to-day on your friend. I took the liberty to put a spy on your steps when I found out who my counterfeit coachman really was."

He advanced, as he spoke, toward the center of the room. His two companions stood just within the doorway, burly, determined-looking fellows. Moll had raised herself from her crouching attitude, and was sidling toward the broken bottle, as if craving for a drop to soothe the fever in her veins. Joe advanced with drunken defiance on his bloated face.

"Reckon ye don't know this is my room," he blustered. "A 'Merican's house is his castle. Git now, ye beats, afore I put ye out."

"Slide, you drunken dog," growled the officer, giving Joe a push that sent him down on hands and knees. "I have a warrant for you, Richard

Racket. You had best yield yourself up quietly or it may be worse for you."

"I don't know that I have denied my name or resisted your authority," Dick sternly answered, facing the officer boldly. "But I deny your right to come into a man's room and knock him down because he claims his rights. You are not a king if you are a policeman."

"I want none of your bluster, my man," answered the officer angrily. "If you venture to defy me, I will have you in irons before you can wink an eyelid."

Dick's eyes flashed. He was evidently growing angry.

"I tell you this, my friend," he proudly declared. "I am a gentleman born, and claim the treatment of a gentleman. I will take insolence from no man if he were ten times a detective."

"That's the talk," exclaimed Joe as he arose. "Pelt it inter ther peeler, Dick. I'll have the law o' him, blast me if I don't!"

"One of you kick that drunken brute out of the way," cried the detective to his companions. "So you resist my authority, do you, my man?" He took a pair of handcuffs from his pocket. "When I have robbers and murderers to deal with, this is my way."

"When I meet a gentleman I treat him as one," answered Dick. "When I deal with an insolent dog, this is my way."

In an instant he brought the back of his hand with a stinging swipe across the officer's mouth, sending him staggering backward.

With a cry of mad rage the latter drew his club and rushed at Dick in a fury.

He struck a savage blow at Dick's head. But he failed to know the man he had to do with. With a quick movement the agile young man evaded the blow, and in an instant had his assailant by the collar. A quick surge, a shrewd trip, and down went the officer to the floor with a crash that shook the house to its foundations.

Without a moment's hesitation Dick sprang forward. The two men who had guarded the door had moved a little inward when ordered to assail the drunken master of the room. They now leaped to oppose the escape of the fugitive, reaching for their weapons as they did so.

But they might as well have tried to stop a lion. Dick had his blood up now, and his veins pulsed with the strength of a giant. The man to the right had drawn a pistol, but Dick's fist shot into his face with the blow of a flail, and he went down in a stunned heap. The other attempted to grasp the fugitive in his sinewy arms. He did not know he was dealing with one of the champion wrestlers of the State. Ere he could defend himself, he was caught by the middle, lifted like a twig from the floor and flung headlong over the shoulder of the young athlete.

All this had taken place in far less time than it takes to tell it. Scarce half a minute had elapsed from the moment of Dick's assault upon his antagonist ere he had disposed of all of them, and was leaping with the bound of a deer for the door.

The detective was the first to regain his feet. With a violent oath he drew a revolver from his pocket and aimed it at Dick, who had just gained the outer passage. The room rung with the keen report. The murderous bullet shot after the fugitive. But it failed to hit him. For at the instant of pulling the trigger, Joe had stumbled, with a tipsy surge, against the officer, utterly disconcerting his aim.

"Scuse me," apologized the swaying drunkard. "Didn't go for to do it. Got a tangle in my legs."

"Blast your awkwardness!" yelled the officer, furiously. "Up, lads, and after him!"

He dashed for the door, the others regaining their feet and following as rapidly as possible.

It was a moment of intense excitement. Will West had sprung to his feet, with a chivalrous intent to come to the aid of his friend, despite the consequences. But there was no need of his help.

Within a minute from leaving the room the detective had gained the street. It lay open before him to the right and left. Not a person was visible except a woman approaching from a distance.

He halted an instant in surprise and disappointment, and then turned hastily back. His two comrades were just descending the last flight of stairs.

"He has not left the house!" screamed the excited officer. "He is in hiding! Guard the doors! The house must be searched! To the rear door, Tom. You watch the front, Harry. I will search this lower floor."

The search proved in vain. No trace of the fugitive was found there. They advanced then up the two flights of stairs, front and rear, to the second floor. This was in its turn thoroughly searched, with the same result. The rooms swarmed with human beings, but all declared absolutely that no stranger had entered their apartments. It did not take long, indeed, to prove this, for there was not a hiding-place in the house. The few closets were quickly examined, and every point that could possibly have concealed a human being searched. But in vain. The detective grew profane as he ascended to the third floor. The affair was growing puzzling and vexatious.

This floor was searched with the same negative result. The fourth, and highest floor, that containing Joe's room, followed. The fugitive had vanished as utterly as if he had been swallowed up. The officers ended their search in the room from which it had begun, hot, angry and excited.

Will West sat there, quietly, a cigar between his lips. Joe was staggering about the room. Moll stood against the wall, a glowing look in her eyes. Some deep thought seemed working in her dazed brain.

"Empty handed, eh?" asked Will, hiding his surprise and satisfaction under an air of indifference. "Where's your man? It will look confounded scaly for three men on the track of one to go back empty-handed."

"We will not go without our prize," answered the officer sternly. "You will go with us, William West. You have aided a criminal to escape. That is a serious charge. You must answer for it!"

"I?" exclaimed Will. "I did not lift a hand!"

"That plea won't work, my friend. You helped him on a former occasion. You shall find that the law is more than a plaything."

Will groaned internally. It began to look as if he was in a scrape. At this instant Moll started forward, fierce with passion.

"You haven't half done your work," she declared. "He is in the house somewhere. Come with me. I hate him! I know every nook of the house. He cannot hide from me!"

She led the way forward, the officers following, with the forlorn hope of success through the aid of this woman. She had spoken with such cat-like spite that they could not doubt her words.

"I hope to mercy you won't succeed, you she devil!" declared Will, when they had left the room. "But I bet high you don't find me when you come back."

He cautiously followed, making his way slyly past them and down the stairs. He breathed with relief on gaining the street. He had, for the present, escaped an unpleasant situation.

Meanwhile Moll led the way toward the upper floor, and down to the level of the third floor.

"We have searched this thoroughly," remarked the detective. "I am satisfied there is no one in hiding here."

"What is that window doing open?" demanded the woman, with little attention to his words. "It was shut an hour ago. Some one has been there."

The window referred to was at the end of a passage. It looked out from the rear of the house over a range of yards, and the back regions of other houses. She advanced to the window and looked out. There was a show of derisive scorn in her eyes as she turned back.

"I thought so," she remarked. "He escaped by this window."

"By this window?" exclaimed the detective, doubtingly. "That is impossible, woman. It is a clear fall of thirty feet. No man could jump it without breaking bones."

"Jumped? Who said he jumped?"

"How else could he get down? There is no tree, no vines, no—"

"There is this," she interrupted.

She pointed to the tin water-spout that ran down close beside the window.

"That? It is impossible!"

"It is true, though. I tell you, you don't know your man. He is one of the best athletes in your city. See here where his foot scraped the paint from the sill. And yonder are the marks where he scratched the pipe. I tell you he has fooled you to your eyes."

The three men stood gazing with wide-open eyelids at the pipe, while belief in the perilous feat slowly made its way into their minds.

"It cannot be!" exclaimed the detective. "No living man could do it."

"Come down-stairs and we will see. It is muddy at the bottom."

She led the way quickly to the yard of the house. At the bottom of the pipe, as she had said, was a thin layer of mud, and there, unmistakably, were recent marks of a man's feet.

"Look!" she said, pointing downward. "Now will you believe?"

"By the Lord! I wouldn't have believed a man living could have done it! Why, the fellow has the fingers and feet of a cat! Stir yourselves, lads; he has not much the start. We may overhaul him yet."

They darted out of the gate and away in different directions, on the forlorn hope of overtaking spry Dick Racket.

CHAPTER X.

DICK ON A MASQUERADE.

MORE than two weeks have passed since the era of Dick Racket's bold escape from the police. During that time he had been searched for with all the ardor and skill of the service, yet he is still free. No trace of him has been found.

During the period in question he has not remained long in one hiding-place, but has changed his location from house to house at the slightest trace of suspicion, until every part of the city has known him as a guest.

When we find him again it is in the tap-room of an up-town English chop-house. Dick is thoroughly adapted to the locality. He is dressed in a suit of light check, with a high-waisted cutaway coat and a flaring red handkerchief at his neck. His face is adorned with bushy side-whiskers, and has an expression of sly cunning, in strange contrast to its ordinary open look. His hair is drawn down low over his forehead, and his plaid cap thrown well back on his head. Altogether he presents a strangely transfigured appearance.

Opposite him sits a full-faced personage, dressed in the rough costume of a workingman, yet with very little sign of labor or exposure in his hands and face.

"Landlord!" cried Dick, in hoarse tones, while he beat a tattoo on the table. "Fetch us hanother go of 'alf-and-'alf. Hand be lively! Stir yer blarsted stumps!"

"No hurry," said Dick's companion. "We are not dying of thirst yet."

"Dry hup, jockey! S'pose I don't know 'em? Won't stir a peg 'cept ye stick pins in 'em. So ye hain't found yer chap yet, hey?"

"No, confound him! He's as fly as a seven-year-old fox."

Dick leaned back in his chair and laughed as if highly amused.

"Dick Racket's a 'oss, I tell you. 'E's a regular 'oss. Don't h' know 'im? Oh, no! Maybe not. Ye'll ne'er find 'im. Ye'll ne'er find 'im if ye 'unt a month."

"But you know his ways, you say? You can put us on his track?"

"Dunno has I said that.—That's the tap, landlord. Prime 'alf-and-'alf.—Well, maybe I can. I know summat habout 'im. Best kiss yer pewter while the lip's wet. That's 'ow to get the cream o' the brew."

He finished with a long pull at his foaming mug, in which he was emulated by his companion.

"You're the deuce for getting off the track, my friend," said the latter. "Come, now; keep square down to business. You tell me that you know Dick Racket well."

"Hain't no one knows 'im better," was the positive answer, while Dick's broadened face grew still broader with a grin. "Why, we was has hiintimate has two kittens in a slipper. H'Ve slept with Dick hin the same bed, and drank hout o' the same mug. Do h' know 'is 'iding-places? Why, h'Ve been with 'im in 'em all. Do h' know Dick Racket? Well, that's a joke!"

He lay back in his chair and laughed heartily, ending with another strong pull at the mug.

"Well, see here," replied the other, a little testily. "I have no time to waste in talk. We want that Dick Racket. We want him bad. It'll be a hundred dollars in your pocket the day you hand him over to us. You know all the hiding-places, you say. Put us on his track then, or put him into our hands, and the cash is yours."

"Nary time," answered Dick, with a cunning leer.

"What do you mean? You are not going back on your offer?"

"This 'oss hain't no donkey, my cove. There's a cool five 'undred hofferred. I want the 'arf o' it, hand h' won't take a red cent less. Gi' us yer fist on hit and the chap's yourn. Git yerself hon record, my 'arty."

The officer, as he seemed to be, hesitated a minute, in apparent thought. Finally he extended his hand and grasped that of Dick's across the table.

"It's a bargain. Two hundred and fifty in clean cash is yours the day you put your man in our hands. But there must be no half-and-half work. For that sum you must hand him over clean."

"'Alf and 'alf's good," rejoined Dick, finishing his mug. "But if hit's to be 'ole 'og, h' m yer 'oss. Don't h' know Dick? Well, maybe not. But h'Ve honly to say to 'im, 'Dick, there's cash on hit, let's go snacks,' hand 'e'll cave, right there. Hit's a bargain, hold chap."

The disguised officer looked rather doubtfully at his boasting companion. He finished, however, by drinking the remainder of his ale to Dick's good luck, and turned to leave the room.

"You know where to find us when you want us."

"Don't h' know? Hain't goin', be you? Let's 'ave hanother mug."

"No, no. I must be off. Good-day. Don't get boosy. There's work before you."

"Good-by, jolly hold lad. 'Ope ye hain't took too much yourself."

He waved his cap tipsily in the air, as his comrade disappeared, while his broad English face beamed with good-humor.

But the officer had no sooner disappeared than a change came over Dick's countenance. His broad face narrowed and lengthened, a shrewd smile marked his lips, and he seemed to be suddenly transformed into another man. He laughed with a keen enjoyment.

"Look out, my sly lad," he said, "or I may nail you for that reward yet. Mercy on us, if this goes on, I'll be in the pay of the whole detective force. This is the third I've had a private interview with now. Hadn't I best apply to headquarters, and put myself on their books as a sleuth-hound, to run down Dick Racket? Bet high I could sell them all."

He leaned back in his chair in great self-satisfaction. Customers were coming and going, and Dick amused himself awhile with watching them, while a host of thoughts flowed in quick succession through his active brain.

"By all that's lovely, but I've whipped my team down-hill at a jolly rate!" he said to himself. "What's come of all my frolics and junk-etings; all my wild nights and royal days; all my sprees with the lads, our suppers and sandwiches, our tricks and wagers, our dances and deviltries? All gone to the winds. All flown to the dogs. And here am I skulking and hiding, fighting and humbugging the police, not a cent in my pocket but what's borrowed, and a deuce of a ticklish charge hanging over my head. I can feel the knot of the hangman's rope under my ear at this minute. Does a sport's life pay?—that's the question. I've sowed acres of wild oats, and Lord, how thick the weeds are coming up!"

He rested his head on his hand in serious meditation.

"But after all, my tricky uncle drove me to it. I wasn't born a fool. Ill-usage has made me one. And now that he wants to redeem his roguery I've got nothing to show but that confounded riddle, which Old Nick himself couldn't make sense of."

The beer was certainly in Dick's brain. His eyes closed after a minute more, and he fell off into a sound sleep, with the thought of the mysterious document still troubling his mind.

It was not a dreamless slumber. Dozens of fancies raced through his brain, all more or less connected with the puzzling document. He read from it the most extraordinary meanings. The paper itself took strange shapes, and was now a dragon and now a serpent. Finally his dreams took on a new phase. With a start, even in his sleep, he saw his uncle again, seated in the chair in the library, and with the same ghostly aspect which he had worn on a former occasion. In its hand, however, the spectral figure held up a paper, like that of Dick's dream. And the eyes of the visionary phantom were turned to the left, where were visible a long mirror, in whose clear surface the paper was reflected. Dick looked therein, and to his surprise he saw perfectly legible lines of writing. He eagerly set himself to read it, with a hope, even in his dream, of solving the mystery.

"Meet me at Jake's, at sharp ten, to-morrow. Have you made anything yet of the puzzle which I left with you? If not, bring it along and we will tackle it together. I have an idea. Cover your track if you can. Don't let the hounds trail you, as before. Yours, R."

"Jake's" was a saloon in the western section of the city. At sharp ten the next morning, as

per appointment, Will was on hand. He had done his best to avoid being tracked, and fully believed that he had succeeded. He entered the saloon with an air of confidence.

"Any one asking for me, Jake?"

"Yes, a gentleman just come in. You will find him in the private room to the left of the stairs, Mr. West."

"Very well."

Will proceeded to the room in question. Here stood Dick Racket, though at first sight he hardly knew him. There was nothing odd about his dress, but he wore a huge red mustache, and a wig of shining auburn hair, that gave a new aspect to his face. He laughed at Will's surprise.

"Masquerading, Will. Got to do it, my buck. They're hunting me close. Come with a clear track, eh, lad?"

"I fancy so. I doubled considerably, and could see no sign of a tracker."

"How about the riddle? Have you made it out?" asked Dick.

"No, hang it! Here it is."

He drew the mysterious paper from his pocket.

"I have an idea, Will. I'll tell you how it came to me."

He proceeded to tell the story of his dream.

"What do you think of that? Dreams sometimes have a meaning. It may be inverted writing, only to be made out by reflection in a mirror."

"Hang my stupidity, why didn't I think of that myself?" cried Will. "It would be odd if your uncle had come to you in sleep to reveal the secret. It is said the dead sometimes come back in dreams."

"The dead?"

"Yes. I heard this morning that he died yesterday. It may be merely rumor."

"It must be true! That's a bad job for me, Will, if they nab me. But a fig for worry; let's try if the vision is bread or ashes."

It was easy to test the dream. A mirror hung in the room. A line of the mysterious writing on the outside of the document served as a first test. This was reflected in the face of the mirror, and there, to their astonished eyes, appeared in a clear-written text:

"Read not the within until after my death."

"AMOS WILMOT."

"Eureka!" cried Will. "The ghost has told the truth, and we're a pair of thick-headed numbskulls! Turn over, Will. He is dead, and the secret is ours. Quick! My fingers are tingling with anxiety."

Will, equally curious, hastened to obey. The communication was reflected in the shining glass. Will let it fall in disgust.

"Hang it! the thing is a sell. It's no clearer than before."

"The deuce it isn't!" exclaimed Dick, snatching it up again. "That shows your want of education. It's a piece of prime German text, and as clear as a book."

"German text! Well, I know no more of German than of Greek. Read it."

Dick was already reading it, with a lowering face and set lips. He ended with a violent exclamation.

"The cat's loose! And I would have kicked the man who told me that Amos Wilmot was the rascal he's here confessed himself. It's not square to curse a dead man, but by Jove—"

"What is it?" asked Will, impatiently. "Another will suppressed, as you fancied?"

"Worse than that. Listen to this."

Dick translated as follows:

"All the property possessed by me belongs of right to Richard Racket. The clause in his father's will under which I hold it was fraudulent. I secretly inserted it myself before the will was signed. Stricken by conscience, I have prepared this confession. I cannot bring myself to yield my good name while I live; but after my death may justice be done, and my crime retrieved."

"Signed, AMOS WILMOT."

The two young men stood looking at one another with questioning eyes.

"There's a precious bit of conscience fund," declared Dick, with compressed lips. "What do you think of that?"

"I wish you had found another will instead."

"Why?"

"I fear this won't hold water. See here, Dick, I have some notion of the law. Whether he was deceived or not, your father signed the will. And this document will hardly hold in law. You cannot prove where you got it, except by your own assertion. This signature is not witnessed. I fancy it is a useless find."

"By good and bad, I'll try it anyhow! Phil

Morton shall not swoop in my cash while there's any fight left in my bones!"

"Perhaps your uncle may have left a will in your favor, and so repaid his debt of honor."

"No. I know that during my fling he willed it all to sly Phil Morton. I defied him, and Phil coddled him. He might have changed it, only for his hurt. Death has settled the matter now."

"Then fight, Dick, that's my advice."

"Fight I will, like a game-cock, while I've got a feather left."

CHAPTER XI.

A HOME TRAIL.

DICK RACKET left the door of Jake's saloon alone. Disguised as he was, he did not deem it wise to be seen in the company of Will West. The latter was therefore left behind to follow at his leisure.

Dick stood a minute or two at the saloon door, idly whipping his knee with the small cane he carried, as if in doubt what course he would take next.

But he was not as easy and careless as he seemed. His eyes were busy, and there was not a feature of the surroundings that escaped his keen inspection.

Persons were passing to and fro, some lounging, some seemingly pushed by business. Only two were at rest. On a box across the street, sat a man, very shabbily dressed, and smoking a pipe with a great show of content, as if he were waiting for a job to turn up. Nearer Dick a well-grown boy, with a very sharp face, stood lounging against a lamp-post.

The disguised fugitive took these two within the circuit of his vision. He stepped away as if to pursue his course up the street, then quickly halted and turned. The boy had straightened himself from his lounging attitude, and was looking eagerly after him. The man had taken the pipe from his mouth and was on the point of rising from his seat. His eyes were turned with a keen glance in the same direction.

"Thought so," said Dick to himself. "Shadowed, by Jove! Will is not sharp enough to deal with these customers. They've tracked him here, and I'll be hanged if they don't smell me. I knew there was something unnatural in the cut of that chap's shabby coat. Very well, we'll see who wins."

While thus cogitating he was walking leisurely along the street, without seeming to heed the spies he fancied he had discovered. He walked on for several squares in this heedless fashion, then paused at a store window, into which he seemed to be idly looking. But in that instant he managed to catch a glimpse of the situation behind him.

Half a square off, on the other side of the street, was the man with the pipe, walking carelessly along. There was no trace of the boy.

"They are not sure of me," he said to himself. "The boy is left to keep up the chase of Will. The man is following me on a venture. That's my notion at least; now to prove it."

He started forward again, easily at first, but quickly mending his pace until he found himself walking at full speed. This rate was kept up until he had advanced several squares; then he turned a corner in such a way as to give him an opportunity to look back. There was his pursuer, the pipe now out of his mouth, eagerly and hastily pushing forward.

"That settles it," said Dick. "I have nailed his game; now to shake him."

He commenced again a rapid walk, turning corner after corner rapidly, shooting down narrow streets and through courts, pushing through crowds. For fifteen minutes he went on at this pace, until he was thoroughly out of breath, without once looking behind him. Then he turned a sharp corner and darted hastily into a deep doorway of an adjoining house.

He waited, deeply breathing, in doubt whether or not he had thrown his pursuer from the track. He was not long in suspense. In a moment more the man came around the corner, almost at a run, and panting from his exertions. He hurried down the street for a short distance, then quickly stopped. He had lost sight of his game. He turned hastily back. There was Dick behind him, just disappearing into the adjoining street.

"That point is settled," considered the fugitive. "The chap has a keen scent. He hangs on like a sleuth. I must shake him by hook or crook, or my cake's settled."

The course pursued had brought him within a short distance of the Schuylkill River, that bathed the city on the west. An idea came into Dick's fertile brain, and he bent his steps in

this direction. Five minutes brought him to the banks of the stream, at the extremity of a long marble wharf. Below the edge of the pier ran the dark, chill water, ten feet down. Dick seated himself on a post at the wharf's edge, and gazed into the stream.

After a rest of a minute or two he looked behind him. There sat his imperturbable pursuer, at rest on a block of marble, the pipe again in his mouth, and his eyes fixed on the clouds, as if not a thought of anything earthly was on his mind.

Dick gritted his teeth with spleen.

"I'll treat you to some pepper in your stew, my hearty! Fun's fun; but you've carried this joke a little too far."

He rose and idly stretched himself. Then he took a cigar from his pocket, and beckoned to the man. The latter rose and came toward him.

"Will you be kind enough to let me have a light?" he asked.

"I'm afeard my pipe's out," was the reply. "I've took too long a draw for comfort's sake."

"I fancy you have," rejoined Dick with a sarcastic laugh.

"I'm a poor devil, on the look for a job," continued the spy. "Mebbe you can put me on the track of one."

"Why, I always like to give a poor devil a lift," returned Dick. "Let's see, what's your line? Do you know anything about the water?"

"A bit."

"Can you swim?"

"Like a duck."

"Then I see a neat opening for you."

"Where?"

"Down there," pointing down to the river. "I promised you a lift. Here it is."

In an instant he had the fellow by the waist. The chap was strong and heavy, but he was like a feather in Dick's arms. With a vigorous lift he was raised bodily, suspended for a moment, wildly struggling over the dark flood and then let fall. Down with a splash and a surge he went, far beneath the deep waters.

Dick stood looking down into the stream. After a few seconds the fellow emerged, puffing like a porpoise, and striking out to swim.

"Good-by, my jolly," laughed Dick. "Hope you won't freeze, for the water is deuced cold. You've walked and you've run after Dick Racket. Now you can swim after him. That will make a neat report for you at the Central. Farewell, and beware of the gudgeons."

Dick ran laughing up the wharf, followed by curses from the sadly tricked spy, who was splashing in the chill waves.

He was not long in putting distance between himself and the soaked spy. A half-hour found him far away in the city, several miles distant from the scene of the free bath.

The portion of the city into which Dick had now made his way was one that bore no savory reputation. It was that noted "down-town" region, in which all the disreputable characters of the city were gathered.

Dick looked around him, a little surprised to find where his heedless feet had brought him. Suddenly his eyes became fixed, in marked attention. Just before him was a well-known figure, that of Moll Brandon. She was standing at a corner, apparently in waiting, while a look of impatience marked her face.

Dick turned to hide his surprise, and struck a match, lighting the cigar which he had failed to light at the spy's cold pipe.

He hesitated but for a moment, and then walked forward, passing by Moll so closely that he could have touched her. His disguise, and the manner in which he drew his mouth over the cigar, served him well. She looked him in the face without a show of recognition.

Dick strolled carelessly on, but he had not gone far ere he met another well-known face. This was that of Joe Grogger, seemingly sober, and hurrying forward toward Moll.

Dick turned again and walked leisurely back. He saw Moll start hastily forward to meet Joe, and eagerly accost him. Some quick words passed between them, a few of which the listener caught.

"At the Tramp's Delight. I've left him there in waiting. He is in a precious temper, Moll."

"He can't play on me, for all his temper," she harshly answered. "Leave the balance to me, Joe. He's got to bleed."

The Tramp's Delight! What delectable place was that? Dick had never heard of it before. He had been tracked by a spy that day. He must play the spy now.

Moll had plunged back into the street on

whose corner she stood. Joe turned and lounged lazily away. Evidently he had done his share of the job. Moll was the one to be felled. Dick put himself in an instant on her track.

It was not a very charming path she pursued. Through dirty and ill-smelling streets and alleys she passed, inhabited by tattered men, women and children, of all ages and degrees of dirt, many of them drunk, while here and there was an evil-faced ruffian who eyed Dick savagely.

He was in perilous quarters. It was no place for a man with respectable clothes. He slyly unhooked his watch-chain and slipped it into his pocket. His hand slid quietly down till it touched the stock of a revolver in his pocket.

Moll moved on with the free step of one thoroughly at home amid all this misery and degradation. Dick followed.

He did not lose sight of the fact that a brace of ruffians were following him, close behind. He was now in the very heart of the dangerous district. A man might be knocked down and robbed here, or even beaten to a jelly, and his assailants laugh at the authorities.

"Moll has led me into a den of thieves," he simply said, while every nerve in his body grew alive with alert readiness.

It was needed. A hand fell on his shoulder. A hoarse voice growled into his ear:

"Hold yer hosses, young 'un. Jist stop and tell a poor chap what's o'clock!"

"Just struck one," answered Dick, wheeling sharply around, and dashing his fist between the eyes of the ruffian.

The burly fellow went down as if he had been kicked by a mule.

The companion of the felled villain sprung forward, with a horrible oath. But he hastily paused when he found that a revolver was staring him in the face, near enough to touch his nose.

"Look out it don't strike two," cried Dick, sternly. "Slide, you beat, or I'll sprinkle your brains on these brick walls!"

The fellow hastily retired, protesting and cursing.

"That will do. Now keep your distance, or I'll salt you with lead. You have barked up the wrong tree, this hitch."

Dick walked on. His felled assailant was crawling, with terrible oaths, to his feet. The two fellows followed again, but at a respectful distance. Evil looks were cast on the daring intruder, but the weapon in his hand, and the late proof of his prowess, kept villainy back. He moved on unmolested.

But he had lost sight of Moll in the momentary diversion. He hastened forward, with the hope of recovering the lost trail. Just before him another street crossed the one he was following. He gained it, and gazed up and down its course. No trace of Moll was visible.

Dick stood for a moment in a quandary. Which course had she taken, right or left? There was no other street near enough for her to have reached. She must have sought shelter. But where?

To the right the row of tumble-down residences was broken by a better built and more pretentious edifice. Toward this Dick hurried, with the hope that it might be the place sought for. There across its front, in glaring red letters, was the sign:

"THE TRAMP'S DELIGHT."

"So far, good," he declared to himself, with a sense of satisfaction. "Now to find out the secret of Moll's mission. I feel in my bones that I have some stock in that business."

He entered without hesitation the open door of the rum-mill. It was well-tenanted with a dilapidated and vile crowd, some of them beastly drunk. At the side were tables, tenanted by the more aristocratic customers. At one of these sat Moll, in company with a man at sight of whom Dick started.

This personage was dressed in a coarse suit, the coat buttoned to the throat as if to conceal the lack of a collar. A blue handkerchief around his neck partly covered his chin. His visored cap was drawn down so that only his eyes appeared.

He was evidently seeking to conceal his identity, but it was wasted on Dick, who knew him at a glance.

It was Phil Morton, his scheming cousin!

CHAPTER XII.

LIFE AT THE TRAMP'S DELIGHT.

"GIMME a snoozer o' old rye, boss, and quick as thunder, d'ye hear?"

Dick had grown suddenly very drunk. He could hardly keep his feet as he made this de-

mand. The bartender, with a look of surprise at his respectable dress, passed over the liquor.

"Reckon you've made a ten-strike lately," he remarked.

"You bet," hiccupped Dick, staggering to the bar, and filling the glass to the brim with the vile liquid there dispensed as whisky. "Guess I've—hic. Guess I've made Rome howl."

"Plank down the forfeit, then. It's cash down at this bar."

"Want to 'sult a gen'l'man?—hic. Got pocket full o' greenbacks. Smother you in gold dollars—hic—if you open that oyster-bar o' yourn ag'in. Here's yer dough."

He planked down a coin on the bar with a hitching stagger. At the same instant the glass, raised to his lips, slipped from his loosened fingers, and fell with a crash to the floor, pouring its vile dose over the thirsty boards.

Dick stood with his hands on his knees, looking down at the wreck, and growling deep down in his throat as if he had met some dreadful misfortune.

"That's what comes o' 'grease on yer fingers," he muttered. "Don't nobody say I'm drunk. 'Cos it's a lie, and I'll punch—I'll punch—" He sought to straighten himself, and lurched blindly across the room, bringing up in a limp heap on the floor on the opposite side. "I'll punch his head!"

These last words were brought out in a low grumble. Dick remained doubled up against the wall, his head depressed, his face on his knees. A faint snore followed. He had apparently dropped off into a drunken sleep.

The landlord let him alone. He had been paid twice over for his loss. The seemingly drunken man had settled down close beside the table tenanted by Moll and her companion. They looked down on him in a moment's question.

"Oh, he's only a bloated beat," remarked Moll, scornfully. "He's been pourin' in blue pizen, and now he's come to anchor. Go ahead. Let's hear from you."

The answer came in a low, cautious tone, while the speaker gazed suspiciously and anxiously around the saloon.

"What made you bring me to such a place as this? A den of cut-throats, where a respectable man is in danger of his life."

"Likely you'd sooner meet me at the Continental, or some sich tony place," Moll scornfully replied. "I'm a neat figure to meet gentlemen in 'spectable society, ain't I?" looking down at her soiled and ragged dress. "Brung you here 'cause I've got more sense than you. Nobody won't hurt you while I'm about."

"I see." He nodded, as if he perceived the justice of her remarks. "I don't intend to do anything but on the square, Moll."

"You'd best not try it," she savagely replied. "I've got the whip hand on you, mister. Try a trick on me and I'll make you howl."

"But it's no place here to pass cash. Be at the place I told you— You know where it is?"

"Like a book. Lived near there. Afore whisky made me the thing I am now."

"Be there at eight o'clock, Thursday evening. I will see that the coast is clear."

"Beecheroff. Don't I know it?"

"Hush! hush! No names. Give the signal. I will let you in. The cash shall be ready. But mind, that ends all between us."

"I'm sound as a brick," rejoined Moll, with a significant nod. "When I say beans I mean beans. You plank down handsome, and you won't find me snoozin' round ag'in."

"You're bleeding me too heavy, as it is."

"Not a red. I know the vally o' diamonds."

The drunken man at the wall gave a stir at this minute, followed by a louder snore.

Moll looked down on him.

"Bet that chap's been slingin' rank p'isen," she remarked. "Been caught in a reg'lar cyclone. I know. I've been there."

"That's all," said Phil, cautiously. "You understand. Sharp eight, Thursday night. Now let me out of this dangerous den."

"Not yet," answered Moll, sternly. "You can't play sharp on me, as you've been trying. Had job enough to fetch you here. You don't slide a step till I've got security in hand."

"But—" he anxiously began.

"No but about it. I want your promise to pay fer a clean five hundred."

"I'll be hanged if you'll get it, then!"

"Won't I? Then out jumps your cat from the bag, that's all."

"I will never put my reputation in your hands."

"I ain't going to use the paper, you fool. It's yours again when I get the cash. But I'm bound to have security."

This conversation had been continued in a very low tone, with frequent breaks whenever any of the customers of the saloon came too near. As for the snoring fellow against the wall, they cease to pay heed to him. Phil looked doubtfully at the evil faces surrounding.

"Do you imagine I care for your threat, Moll Brandon?" he replied, with a return of confidence. "You dare not inform on me, for it will check your last chance for cash. You get no paper from me."

She looked at him with a gleam of rage in her eyes.

"You blind fool!" she hissed. "Do you know that you are under my finger at this minute? This is hell's vestibule, you idiot! I have but to say a word, and the whole crew will be on you. They'll fling you penniless into the street, if nothing worse happens. And I'll do it, too," she fiercely repeated. "You've been trying to play with me, but I've got the drop on you now."

Phil's lips grew white at this threat. He looked around him. More than one pair of evil eyes were fixed suspiciously on his face. Two burly ruffians, in particular, who had just entered, were looking at him with glances that made him tremble. They were the same with whom Dick had had his quarrel in the street.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Your promise to pay. Here is pen, ink and paper. You promise to pay five hundred dollars on demand. I will return the paper when I get the cash. But you can't play with Moll Brandon."

Phil was decidedly in a trap. He recognized that. Without further words he drew the paper to him, and wrote the note of hand demanded. This he passed to Moll, who read it carefully, and then, with an air of satisfaction, concealed it in her dress.

"So far, good. But that's not all. I want some cash in hand. There's three days yet to the time fixed, there's a railroad ride, and I want to get a decent dress. I won't go to—the place—like a tramp."

"How much?" asked Phil, resignedly.

"A ten. Not a cent less."

He took out his purse, selected a note from it and passed it to her. He was about to replace the purse in his pocket when a heavy hand came down on it with a vigorous slap.

"Drap it there, hoss. Ye're a stranger, I take it, and ain't paid yer footin'. That there's my provender."

The speaker was the ruffian whom Dick had recently felled in the street. He wrenched the purse from the weaker hand of its owner, and was about to put it in his pocket, with a sneering laugh, when Phil, maddened by the insult, sprung to his feet, and dashed like a wild-cat at his assailant.

In an instant there was an uproar in the saloon. Some of its *habitués* crowded toward the assailants, others pushed off. Loud cries arose. The landlord hastily sprung from behind his bar.

Phil had caught his purse in the thief's hand, and was striving to wrest it from the firm grip, without thought of consequences in his eagerness to recover the money.

"Take that, you bloody bummer!"

A slap from the left hand of the ruffian stretched Phil helplessly across the table from which he had just arisen.

Moll now sprung forward fierce as a tigress.

"Drop that, Blue Dick! He is my friend, and I won't stand by—"

"Shet up and skip! Git now, ye dead beat, or I'll kick you out."

"Kick me, will you, you blear-eyed pick-lock!" yelled Moll, furious at the insult.

She sprung at him with a cat-like agility, caught his bushy beard with one hand, and brought the nails of the other in a long, bloody scratch down his cheek.

"Hell's fire! Take her off! Bu'st her head, Larry!" yelled the discomfited thief.

All this had passed in almost an instant. The quiet of the saloon had suddenly given way to a loud turmoil.

Its customers, drunk and sober, were yelling wildly, as if excited to insanity by the fight. Among them the snoring drunkard against the wall was on his feet, wide awake now, and with a very sober look in his keen eyes.

Moll continued her assault on the insulting ruffian. On one side the man called Larry came to the rescue. On the other Phil scrambled again to his feet, and snatched his purse from the hand of the hampered thief. He was instantly assailed by a tattered crew, whom the sight of money had excited to madness.

Larry, the comrade of the thief, caught Moll fiercely by the neck and drew her back with a jerk. But she held on with such a grip that a handful of the villain's beard came with her. Howling with rage and pain the burly ruffian lifted his powerful fist and sprang furiously toward his late assailant.

"Don't strike that woman! On your life, don't touch her!"

"You go to—"

The speech was not concluded. Ere it could be finished, or the uplifted fist could fall on the helpless woman, a blow like that of a sledgehammer descended on the left temple of the poor wretch. Down he went like a log, with a crash that shook the whole house.

It was the fist of Dick Racket which had made this sudden change in the situation.

The young athlete now turned furiously to where his worthy cousin was struggling in the heart of a wild mob.

In an instant Dick sprang into the midst of the struggling mob toward his cousin, who was howling with fear and pain, and feebly repelling his assailants.

Right and left they fell before Dick's swinging arms.

In a minute he had made his way to the heart of the crowd, and stood before his sadly scared cousin.

"Follow me close!" cried Dick, sharply. "Hit right and left, wherever you see a head. Hit hard! This is no play!"

He sprang forward again, closely followed by Phil. It was an easy path. The crowd drew back in affright before those iron fists.

Within a minute Dick reached the door of the saloon, Phil still close behind him.

"Now run, as if the devil had kicked you!" he cried.

Phil, without stopping to think or even to look at his rescuer, complied with this wise advice, and shot off at his utmost speed.

But at this moment Moll sprang from the door of the saloon, with disheveled hair, her eyes flashing with a tigerish glare.

"Run, you fool!" she yelled. "They'll tear you to ribbons if they catch you! Run, or you're a dead man!"

Dick hesitated no longer. He was off like a flash, in an opposite direction to that taken by Phil. A storm of yells came behind. The crack of a pistol was heard and a bullet whizzed by his ear. On he flew, not pausing to breathe till he was safely beyond the limits of that dangerous district.

CHAPTER XIII.

A TRIFLE OF A SURPRISE.

"At sharp eight to-morrow night, Jerry. Be on the watch. He will try to get rid of you all, and make a clear coast for his game. But keep slyly on hand and have an eye open for the woman. Watch where he takes her, and be ready to put me and my party in ambush. Don't fail, old man, for life and death depend on it. There is a villain's trick to be exposed. I am sorry to hear of the death of my uncle. It makes things more ticklish for me. But don't fear; I will discount Phil Morton yet. Sick to your wild boy,"

DICK.

Such was the latter portion of a letter received at Beechcroft by old Jerry. He scratched his head in surprise at its conclusion.

"What does Master Dick mean about the death of his uncle? Who told him that Mr. Wilmot was dead? He is alive yet, thank the stars! and the doctor says he is mending. But what wild game is this that's concocting? I hope it isn't some of his idle tricks. But I'll do as he says, no matter what comes of it."

At about the same hour that old Jerry was reading this letter, at ten o'clock on Thursday morning, a scene closely related to it was taking place at a locality in the center of the city.

This was at the headquarters of the detective force in the Central Police Station. Here several persons were gathered, taking it easy, some with their coats off, while the smoke of pipes and cigars made the air hazy.

"What's on hand this morning?" asked one of them, with a yawn, as he carelessly stretched his lazy limbs.

"Nothing come in yet. All serene, and the sky indigo blue."

"By the way, Tim," queried the first speaker, "how goes that little racket you've had in hand for the past month? That Dick Racket hunt? Holed your fox yet?"

"Yes, by thunder! Holed him deep enough. But can't smoke the hole. Hang his impudence he's harder to nail than old Terry, the Rounder! I've got some of his cronies spying for him, but he's too keen for the whole caboodle."

"It's glorious the way he salted Job Clark. Played a counterfeit on him once, and knocked him out of time the next heat! Job's wild, and swears he'll pinch him sore yet. But you've got to catch your fox before you can take the brush."

"He's as cunning as ten Comanches," responded Tim. "There's not a crack or cranny that hasn't been searched, but not a trace of Dick Racket. But we'll have him yet. Some of his old comrades have gone back on him, and are helping us in the hunt. Set a thief to catch a thief, you know. Treachery is the surest detective."

"All right, my lad. I'll believe you've got him when I see it. I don't believe the man is guilty, anyhow. I helped in the hunt at Beechcroft, you know, and I've got an eye on another man. There's a sly chap there, and I've been quietly looking up his record."

"I don't care a fig for that. Dick Racket's my game, from the shoulder."

The conversation was interrupted at this point by the opening of the door and the entrance of another person, on whom the officers present lazily turned their eyes.

This personage wore a very loud suit of plaid clothes, while his broad face was adorned with bushy side-whiskers, cut in the English style. It was, indeed, no other than Dick Racket himself, in a disguise in which we have already seen him. The fox had come into the kennel of the hounds.

Tim gazed at him with an air of satisfaction. He turned triumphantly to the officer with whom he had been conversing.

"The man that waits wins," he said sententiously. "Glad to see you, Mr. Barney. Sit down. Something's alive, I suppose, to bring you here?"

"Hi rather reckon so," answered the counterfeit Englishman, in his broadest cockney dialect. "Hi've been hon duty, and hi'm 'ere to report."

This was spoken with an air of such conceited satisfaction that the officers listened with their tongues in their cheeks. The fellow was evidently a popinjay.

"What's the report?" asked Tim seizing a pen and preparing to write. "You've hit the mark in the bull's-eye, eh?"

"Well, hi conceit hi 'ave," and he pulled up his collar with a satisfied jerk. "Hi'm ready to 'and 'im hover. Bu—"

"Oh! I know. The reward's all right. We are square men here. One hundred if you put us in a way to nail him. Two-fifty if you put him clean in our hands."

"Onor bright?"

"You can have it in black and white, if you prefer."

"Hall right. Scratch bit down, hand pass hit hover. Hi allers like to 'andle the dokyments hafore hi budge," and he broke into a laugh of silly conceit.

Tim, with a smile of amusement, wrote for a minute, and then tore off the written slip and handed it to his visitor, who sat bolt upright in dignified expectation.

"There you are. An order for two hundred and fifty dollars on the Secret-Service police fund, due at the moment you put the body of Richard Racket, the fugitive criminal, into our hands. Is that to the point?"

"I fancy it is." The voice was so changed that the quick senses of the detectives were instantly on the alert. "I'll rake down that little pile."

"Will you?" asked Tim, satirically. "Then where's your man?"

"Here!"

In an instant a strange transformation came over the appearance of the speaker. The red handkerchief that enveloped his neck was torn away, and with it the side-whiskers. His broad face grew narrower. The florid color on his cheeks disappeared at a movement of his hand. His low-combed hair was thrust back. Before them stood a remarkably transmogrified individual.

Tim sprang to his feet with an oath of astonishment.

"Dick Racket himself, by all that's blue!" he shouted.

"Why, if the court knows itself, I fancy that's the cognomen I was christened with," came the easy answer. "I'm short of funds, and thought I'd step round and rake down that reward."

Tim was not alone in his startled surprise. Every man in the room had sprung to his feet. This was a circumstance such as they had never met before in all their varied experience.

"Dick Racket!" came the general cry. "And

Tim has been hiring the man to play the spy on himself! If that ain't the rickest joke of the season!"

A burst of laughter followed, that made Tim turn blue in the gills with spite.

"Hang your impudent picture!" he cried, angrily. "So you've been playing the cockney on me, have you? You'd better have kept it up, my cove. You've put your mammy's boy in a scrape. By fire and brimstone, I'll pinch you for this!"

"Don't take a little joke that way," laughed Dick. "You're not the only member of the force I've fooled. Why, I've had as many faces these two weeks back as there are hairs in a cat's whiskers."

"And what brings you here now?" asked the officer who had been conversing with him.

"Short of money. Thought I'd come claim the reward which my dear cousin, Phil Morton, has so kindly offered. And I've a bet of a hundred with one of your force which I guess I'll rake in."

Dick had seated himself, and answered this question with an air of provoking ease. The officers looked at him with surprise and interest. Here was something without precedent in their experience.

"There is something hid behind this," remarked the detective. "You are not quite a fool. You did not hide without an object. You have not given yourself up without an object. What are those objects?"

"You are right," rejoined Dick. "Everything I have done has been with an object. And I am not here now with the object of going to prison and standing a trial for murder. Not much! Sit down, gentlemen, and we will talk over those objects."

They obeyed, even Tim suppressing his spite in his growing interest in the promised revelation.

"To begin with," said Dick, but pausing, he drew a cigar from his pocket and coolly lit it.

"To begin with, then, I didn't try to murder my uncle. Dick Racket, the Scapegrace, has been a wild coon, but it's not in him to fling a man into a quarry. But, in the second place, gentlemen, there was some confoundedly ugly evidence against me. Enough to hang me if I'd stood a trial. I had been tricked, I smelt that. But how? was the question. I had my suspicions, but for certain private reasons I could not divulge them. And I took the conceited fancy that I could beat the police hollow in tracking my stolen ring."

"Your stolen ring?" queried Tim.

"Just so. It was stolen from me and used by a villain to put my life in danger."

"And you know who that villain is?"

"It is my scheming cousin, Phil Morton."

"By Heaven, I half believe you!" answered the other detective, energetically. "I doubted that man at sight. I have been quietly investigating his record since. His coat is not spot-free."

"He expects to inherit Mr. Wilmot's estate," answered Dick. "I don't, for I know the will is against me. It was to my interest that my uncle should live, for he might change his will. It was Phil's interest to hinder him changing his will. What's more, this estate is mine by right. It was my father's. I lost it by a knavish trick. It was to Phil Morton's interest that that trick should not be exposed by the only person who could do so."

"This is all very well," Tim broke in, harshly, "but this is not a court. You did not come here expecting to plead your case, did you? You're a little off your eggs, my man. You have earned the money, but you have also earned a home in a cell, and that's where you're going to, without waste of time."

"Oh, hold your jaw, Tim!" cried one of the others. "Let Mr. Racket finish his story. He can't fly out of this eagle's nest."

"All this is not exactly to the point," continued Dick, as easily as if Tim had not spoken. "I have another little story which may be more interesting. I will tell you now it was not money brought me here, but justice. I have traced the thief that stole my ring and the villain that put it into my uncle's hand. There is a little interview on the tapis that I want other ears than mine to hear. And it struck me that you gentlemen would make prime witnesses. Shall I tell you this story?"

"Yes, yes. Go ahead!"

Thus desired, Dick proceeded to relate the incidents of his search for the ring, and the various results of his enterprise. He told all, indeed, except that relating to the paper that criminated his uncle. That he preferred to keep secret for the present. He continued by describing,

much to the amusement of his hearers, the way in which he had got rid of the police spy.

"Hang it! you came near as a flash in drowning him," laughed one of the officers. "The poor devil was dragged here like a soaked rat, and shivering to his very bones."

Dick smiled at the remembrance, and proceeded with the remainder of his story, the tracking of Moll, the meeting at the Tramp's Delight, and the row with which it had ended. He said little, however, of his own prowess in that affair.

"I heard of it," cried one of the officers. "The dead beats there got a deuce of a lashing. So it was *you* that made that earthquake?" He gazed with admiration at Dick's proportions.

"I stirred up the pot a little," answered Dick, modestly. "But that's not to the point: At that meeting of the conspirators to-night, the whole cat may come out of the bag. I want to be present, and want some of you for company. What say you?"

"There is hope in it. We will be with you."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE END OF A VILLAIN'S TRIUMPH.

It was eight o'clock of a Thursday night in November. There was a shiver in the wind premonitory of the coming winter. It was dark and gloomy as a woman's figure came shivering to the gate of Beechcroft and stood before the iron portals as if in doubt about how to gain admission.

She was not left long in suspense, however. The form of a man appeared inside the open-work gate.

"Is it you?" he asked, in a low tone.

"Moll Brandon—and shivering with cold. Open quick, and fetch me where there's a fire."

"Quick! Come in." He opened the gate wide enough to let her through. "We must be quick and cautious. The affair can soon be settled, and you can catch the next train back to the city."

"The sooner the better. Why couldn't you meet me somewhere in the city instead of fetching me away out here this frosty night?"

"Somewhere in the city. At the Tramp's Delight, perhaps." He shuddered at the recollection.

She laughed grimly.

"Come, come; I got it as bad as you. But I saved your purse, and I recovered your watch. I have it here. Don't say now that I'm not honest."

"You got my watch?" he cried, in a tone of delight. "But, hush! We are at the house."

He opened the door and admitted her to the hall. There sat a small lamp which he took up and led the way forward into the mansion.

Hardly had they disappeared when, from behind the great trees on the lawn, the forms of several men made their appearance.

"Hist! Jerry, where are you?" asked one of these, cautiously.

"Here, Master Richard."

"Quick, now. By the front door, you say?"

"Yes. He has taken the back. This way."

The massive portal quietly opened, and the human forms disappeared like ghosts within.

All outside sunk into its pristine silence and gloom. There was nothing to indicate that a living being had been in the vicinity. The wind moaned frostily by in the leafless limbs of the trees. From one room a lamp threw a long bar of light across the lawn, but it only served to deepen the shadows beyond it.

Within the library of the old mansion Moll sat alone. Her companion had left her there, while he absented himself for a minute. She shuddered with superstitious fears as the faint light failed to penetrate the recesses and alcoves of the rambling room, from which shadows seemed moving toward her. Some odd, faint sounds had also startled her. It seemed as if ghostly footsteps were moving outside the room, and drawing in upon her. The scared woman drew her shawl closely round her, and shrunk back timidly into the depths of her chair.

Phil Morton, however, left her not long alone. He was absent but a few minutes.

"About time," she muttered. "I don't like this room. It's too ghostly. And there's phantom footsteps around it!"

He listened for a moment.

"I hear nothing of the kind," he answered.

"I didn't know you were such a scary creature, Moll. It's the trees outside, rustling in the wind, that you have converted into ghosts."

"I don't know," she muttered dreamily. "I wish I had all this over. It is bad enough to be a drunkard, without being a murderer's tool."

"Hold your tongue, you confounded idiot!"

he harshly and fiercely replied. "What do you mean, confound you?"

"I mean that I am not the fool you take me for. I've heard of the ring found in the dead man's hand, and I know how to put that and that together. It was *you* put me up to get Joe to steal the ring. It was for *you* I made him give me up the ring, and the pencil which he had as a present from Dick. It was *you* I gave them to. If I had known your game I would have seen you to the bottom of the Dead Sea first."

"You know a confounded sight too much; or you guess too much, which is as bad. See here, woman. You've shown your hand. Now I'll show mine. I am not going to be a trembling tool, at your beck and call. If I give you this money it will only be on conditions."

"I will not take it on conditions. And you'll give it without them." There was a threat in her tones.

"My conditions are," he continued as if she had not spoken, "that you and your drunken companion leave this city. I will pay your way to the West, and get you into a comfortable home there, away from your evil associates."

"Go West?" she repeated, thoughtfully. "Get rid of this devil of drink? Become respectable again? Oh! God grant that I may do it! Any life, anything, rather than this!"

"That's what I want," he replied, with a sly look of satisfaction. "Marry the man whom you profess to love. Take him away from the demon of liquor. Go where you are not known. Settle down to an honest life. You are both young yet. But if you go on as now you will soon be in a grave."

She answered not for the moment, being apparently lost in a deep reflection. Then her words came slowly and with a regretful strain.

"I do love Joe," she murmured. "I loved another once. But he treated me with disdain, and I grew to hate him—to hate him!" There was a touch of fierceness in this. "And yet, after what I have seen—after that night—I fear—"

"What night? What are you dreaming about, Moll?" he interrupted, in a testy tone.

She turned to him with a flash of disdain in her eye.

"I'll tell you what I'm *dreaming* about, Phil Morton. If you were blind, I was not! Do you know who it was saved you from the hands that would have torn you to pieces at the Tramp's Delight?"

"No. I have wondered ever since who he was. He was a brave and daring fellow, whoever he was."

"Just so. And a generous one, to come to the rescue of his two greatest foes. I will not soon forget that he saved me from the weight of that ruffian's fist. That man, Philip Morton, was your noble-hearted cousin. It was Dick Racket, the man whom you have been scheming to throw into a murderer's cell!"

"Dick Racket!" The voice of Phil rose to a dangerous pitch, in his alarm and consternation. "It cannot be! It is a lie! You are out of your wits!"

"A lie, is it? I think not. I have seen Dick Racket in a fight before. When I saw big Larry go over his shoulder like a chip I knew my man. It was the same lift he gave the policeman at Joe Groggery's quarters."

"Dick Racket!" he repeated, with growing dread. "Then there's the devil to pay in earnest! It's the same man that lay drunk against the wall! By Heaven, he played a trick on me! He heard every word we said! A sweet one *you* are, to appoint a rendezvous under the ears of a spy!"

His voice vibrated with fear and anger.

"Where were your own eyes?" she scornfully replied. "You had a bigger stake in the game than I. I flung no man into a quarry."

"Hush, you imp! Walls have ears, blast you!" His tone was that of an insane man. "You have betrayed me. You must leave this house and region at once. You must leave the city. I will have no witness to that fool's talk. If you are out of the way he can say what he pleases. I can snap my fingers at him then."

"That is not what I am here for," she coldly answered. "Here is your note of hand. Pass over the cash, and let me out of this as soon as possible."

"The sooner the better." He trembled with apprehension as he spoke. "Take the money. Hand me that paper which I was an idiot to give you."

"Wait a minute," she coolly replied, pushing back his hand. "Be sure, and you'll not be sorry, is my motto."

She carefully counted the money, and then, with an air of satisfaction, placed it in some secret pocket in her dress.

"The count is right," she remarked. "Here is your obligation."

He extended his hand in feverish haste to seize the paper which she held toward him. But he was hardly quick enough. Another hand came down with a stern slap, nailing the questionable document to the table. Into his face peered the well-known eyes of Dick Racket, full of mocking triumph.

"Not just now, my smart cousin. There are some gentlemen outside, who are slightly interested in this little game."

Dick had stolen noiselessly into the room, unseen and unheard by the excited confederates. He now waved the prize aloft in triumph, and gave a shrill whistle, that rung loudly through the halls of the old mansion. Instantly, by the various doors leading to the library, men came filing in, until a party of stern-faced persons surrounded the central group. With distended eyes and open mouth Phil Morton sat looking at the silent circle, utterly overwhelmed with consternation.

It was but for a moment, and then he sprang at his cousin, with the strength and fury of a madman.

"Thief! Spy! Murderer! You have robbed me! Return that paper, or—"

"Hold your level," replied Dick, seizing him with an iron grip, and holding him off at arm's length. "Take this, Mr. Jones. It is a prize worth having."

He passed the paper to one of the detectives, who ran his eyes hastily over its contents.

"I promise to pay Mary Brandon five hundred dollars on demand," read the policeman. "The evidence is sufficient, Mr. Racket. I fancy you have nailed the real criminal. I arrest you, Philip Morton, for the attempt to murder your uncle, and for a criminal conspiracy against your cousin."

His hand fell heavily on the shoulder of the shrinking man, whose face had grown deathly with pallor.

"And I arrest you, Mary Brandon, as an accomplice in the plot," said another of the officers. "You have confessed enough to implicate you in the murderous scheme."

"I had nothing to do with it!" she screamed in alarm. "It was he got the ring from me. I did not know what for. I swear I did not know what for!"

"But you were ready enough to hide and to trade on the murder, when you found it out," came the crushing reply.

What might have followed was checked by a most unexpected incident which arrested the attention of every person present.

For at the door of the library there appeared the form of a tall, slender old man, dressed in a long dressing-gown that hung to his feet, while his white, disheveled hair, and thin, colorless face, had a spectral aspect in the dim rays of the lamplight.

"My uncle's ghost!" cried Dick, shrinking back with a superstitious alarm. "The dead is walking again!"

"Not the dead, but the living!" exclaimed Phil. "Who says he is dead? Who charges me with the murder of a living man?"

"Living?" Dick's voice vibrated with a new tone. "Living? Then I have been deceived! I have been played with! Oh, my dear uncle, how glad I am to see you yet alive!"

He sprang forward to the tottering figure of the old man, embraced him with his strong arm, and tenderly led him forward.

Then the rumor of his death which Will West had brought was false? The paper which was to be read only after his death had been read too soon! Dick's heart was full of regretful feeling as he led the old man to his favorite chair and tenderly seated him.

The eyes of the invalid gazed with surprise over the assembled group. He seemed to recognize something strange in the situation without knowing what. His mouth opened. The muscles of his face strained. A gurgling sound came from his throat. He seemed desperately striving to speak.

At length words, broken and fitful, came from his trembling lips, the first he had uttered since his memorable words to Dick.

"Who are these? What has happened? What means this strange scene?"

The low, scarce audible voice sounded clearly in the perfect silence of the room. Phil Morton broke from his captor and sprang forward to his uncle's feet, kneeling like a penitent.

"They have arrested me, uncle! They charge me with trying to murder you! With flinging

you into the quarry! Say, oh! say it is not true! Clear me of this false charge!"

"What does this mean?" asked the old man, in a voice of growing strength. "No one threw me over the rocks; I fell myself. I was taken with a spasm and fell."

At this unlooked-for revelation, looks of surprise passed round the room. Here was a new phase on the question.

Dick straightened himself in the pride of his vindication.

"But my ring!" he suddenly cried. "How came it in your hand?"

"The ring? What ring?"

The invalid's eyes were full of helpless wonder.

"And the pencil found at the top of the rock? And the marks of a struggle?" queried the detective who had arrested Phil. "And the admissions we have just heard? Ha! Mr. Phil Morton, your skirts are by no means clear! Who put the ring into Mr. Wilmot's closed hand? Who arranged these other tell-tale indications? By Heaven! it is as murderous a scheme as that of which your cousin was accused."

A stern suspicion filled the old man's eyes as he listened to these words and looked from the face of the man that knelt at his knee to the open countenance of Dick Racket.

"I begin to see," he feebly said. "I have not been deaf all these days in bed though I could not speak. It is growing clear to me now. It is I that have been the criminal. I have robbed the worthy to aid the worthless." His weak hand repelled the man who knelt beside him. "I have proved an unfaithful steward. Thank God I have lived long enough to redress the wrong I have done!"

Dick sprung to the old man's side at these words.

"I forgive all!" he cried. "You have not wronged me! You were justly exasperated by my wild life. But that is over—that is over, uncle! See here! You recognize this paper?" He held in his hand the mysterious document which he had so recently read.

The old man's eyes dilated with surprise and dread.

"That!" he exclaimed. "You have found that! You know—"

"I know nothing. Nobody shall know anything," rejoined Dick. "It is the only record of the past. Thus I remove it."

He held it over the lamplight. In an instant it was aflame. Not until the burning paper scorched his fingers did he let it go, a fluttering fragment. The perilous record had been reduced to ashes.

"That clears your reputation, uncle," he added. "Far be it from me to bring aught against you, though I wander in beggary my life through."

Phil Morton had risen to his feet and fixed his eye on his noble-hearted cousin with insolent triumph.

"You are a generous fool," he remarked, in bitter scorn. "I am greatly your debtor. You have left Beechcroft mine. It is mine, do you hear? Mine! Now do your worst, you fool!"

"No," came in stern tones from his uncle. "I know you now, Philip. My eyes are opened by the approach of death. I see how I have misjudged. Yet your cousin's noble renunciation of his fortune and vindication of my fame shall not be for naught. It is my duty now to do justice, and to retrieve the crime of my younger days. Will some one go for a notary? Quick, while I have strength left. I have to draw up a will, leaving all my property to the man to whom it rightfully belongs."

"There is no need of a notary," said one of the officers. "I understand the form of a will. There are plenty of witnesses here. No time need be lost."

Phil Morton looked on in helpless rage while pens and paper were procured, and the improvised notary seated himself at the table, prepared to receive the commands of the invalid.

The white-lipped villain did make one effort to interfere, but was sternly checked by the officer, who had again laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You have reached the end of your rope, my man," harshly declared the detective. "Beware that you do not coil it round your neck. You have played your last card and lost the game."

"I leave all of which I die possessed to my dear nephew, Richard Racket."

The pen of the writer ran rapidly over the paper. Dead silence reigned in the room. Ten minutes passed.

"Your signature here, Mr. Wilmot."

A look of joy marked the old man's face as he grasped the pen and feebly traced his name.

By that one deed he had retrieved the wrong of years.

CHAPTER XV.

GETTING EVEN.

Two months have passed since the scene with which our last chapter closed. We find ourselves again in the locality of our opening chapter. Nearly the same company is assembled. The table is set with all the requisites to a banquet, though no food is yet visible. Over it the blazing chandelier sends its warm light. At the head of the table stands Dick Racket, seemingly the Dick of the old days. Ranged along the side are guests at the seats which they occupied on that former occasion. But there is a queer, mocking smile on Dick's lips and glance in his eyes, as he raps for silence.

"I am happy to meet you here once more, gentlemen," he began, in a soft tone. "You remember our last lively meeting in this room. You know what happened then, and what has happened since. Then I had begged myself and was ready to take up the life of a tramp. Now my uncle is dead and buried and I am the heir of his estate. Dick Racket, the ruined scapegrace, is now Richard Racket, the estated gentleman."

A rattle of beating hands and outcry of applause broke into his speech at this point. He continued, after silence was resumed:

"I need not tell you what became of those who sought to ruin me. I fancied they had been punished enough, and did not care to push them to the wall. Moll Brandon and Joe Grogery are settled on a farm in the West. As for my cousin, Phil Morton, he tried to drive me to a dungeon, but I have no desire for revenge. I have also given him his liberty, on his promise to depart far away from the city which he has dishonored by his presence."

"Good for you, Dick! Generous old Dick!" came cries of applause.

The smile on Dick's lips grew yet more satirical.

"As for you, gentlemen," he continued, "you dropped off from Dick, the ruined spendthrift, like leaves from a dead tree. But you have come back to Dick, the heir, like trout to a sugary bait. I don't blame you. It's human nature. You have all sent me congratulations on my good fortune. In return I have invited you to a little banquet, where we may bury the hatchet, and have one of our jolly times of old. What say you? Have I spoken to the card? Are you ready to help Dick Racket in a fling with his new fortune, as you did with his old?"

"Ay! ay! Royal old Dick! Prime old lad! Not much he's going to turn parson. He's got blood in his bones yet. Merry boy, we're with you."

"While there's a cent left," responded Dick to this chorus of cries. "And then a kick into the gutter as before. But a truce to all that. Your dinner is before you, gentlemen. Uncover the dishes, and may you enjoy the feast."

The guests needed no second invitation. They drew their chairs eagerly up, with hungry eyes, the many covered dishes which graced the table were quickly uncovered, and then—there was a look of blank astonishment which Dick perceived with a bland smile.

"Pile in, lads. I fancy some of you have not had a solid meal since your last at Dick Racket's expense."

But the chairs were pushed sullenly back, while looks of rage and shame and muttered exclamations of anger succeeded. For the uncovered dishes had revealed a very Barmecide feast. Instead of the smoking viands hoped for, the dishes were filled with the most indigestible food. One, for instance, contained an array of cut straws, and was labeled: "Salad for Suckers." Another contained beet-tops, marked, "Beets for Dead Beats." In a third was an array of chopped-up bones, labeled: "Lamb-chop: for Lame Ducks." A fourth was filled with an ill-smelling fluid, marked: "Brandy for Bummers." Like unsavory ingredients filled the other dishes, there being "Tripe for Traitors," "Roast Pig for Rounders," and similar uncomplimentary epithets on all the dishes that graced the long tables.

The momentary sense of astonishment was followed by a burst of rage. Some of the guests remained sitting, but the most of them angrily pushed back their chairs, while a chorus of oaths and threats arose. Yet Dick listened as calmly as if they were paying him the highest compliments.

"Come, gentlemen, you are not satisfied already, I hope. You are anxious to have the old

times back again, and I am doing my best to satisfy you. Come, Harry, fall to. Tim? Joe? You are not all going at the opening of the feast?"

"Let's go for him, boys!" cried one of the insulted guests. "Fling the dirty dog out of the window! Let's get even with him on this base trick!"

Others were of the same mind, and several of the guests rushed for the mocking master of the feast. But Dick caught up a chair with his two hands and said in an inviting tone:

"Come ahead, lads. If you want to wind up with a mill, I'm your horse."

They drew back on seeing his action, not quite so anxious as they were for a row with doughty Dick Racket. Turning, they fled in rage and shame from the room, with loud curses and threats of future revenge.

A half-dozen remained, among them Will West. A laugh of derision followed the retreat of the dead beats.

"I've shown them my hand now in earnest," cried Dick. "They served me a dog's trick before. I vowed then to be even with them, and I am. And now, lads, you that stuck to Dick in his decline, see if we can't find something better than sawdust and straw to celebrate his victory."

A clap of the hands brought a force of waiters into the room, who rapidly cleared the table of its odd feast. Quickly this was replaced by smoking viands, and the guests set to with hearty appetites, sharpened by their enjoyment of the discomfiture of the bummers whom Dick had so signally punished.

Long the feast continued, wild waxed the mirth, loud rolled the laughter, and Dick, at the head of the table, seemed again his old wild self.

But the longest merrymaking has its end, and this came to a close at last, with the last song sung and the last toast drank.

"And so winds up the past," declared Dick, rising on his chair. "With this ends my wild life, lads. Dick, the Scapegrace, henceforth will be Dick, the Reformed. You are welcome to Beechcroft, every man of you, when and how you will. And you will always find there a hot plate and a corner cigar. But my wild oats are all sown, and the wildacre from this time on settles down into the quiet country gentleman. I've had my fling, lads. I leave the ring now for new fools to fill."

And so it came to pass. Years have passed since then, and Dick is still the jolly fellow of old, always ready for a cigar with a friend, and a chat over old times, and always with a plate at table for the faithful cronies of his wild days. But he has grown settled and sedate, and the walls of Beechcroft resound to no wild orgies under his regime. Yet many a hearty dinner graces its ample board, and many a merry feast is held in its sturdy halls, and Dick is the old Dick still, sobered down but not transformed by the heavy hand of time.

THE END.

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